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First Graders, Superheroes, and Princesses: Bringing Literacy To Life Through Dramatic Play

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First Graders, Superheroes, and Princesses: Bringing Literacy To Life

Through Dramatic Play

by

Heather Martens

May 2011

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of

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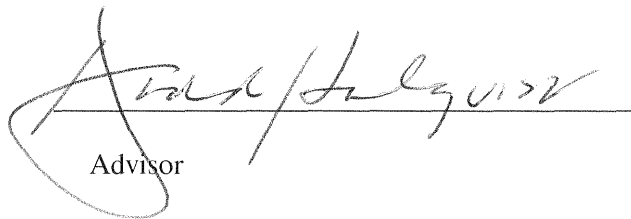
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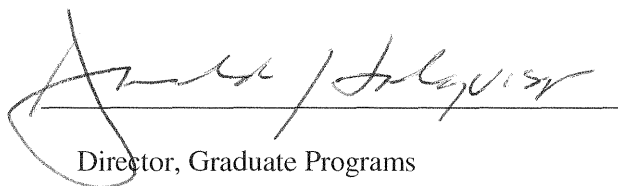
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Chapter One: Introduction

Within the walls of my classroom are children from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There are five students who come from Spanish speaking homes, and have at least one or two family members who immigrated to the United States from Puerto Rico. My classroom has all of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for the first grade. These children speak English but, need help articulating their speech, and developing their writing and reading skills. One area that interests me about all my students is how they play and socialize with each other. I have come to realize that play is such a powerful teaching tool. The following example is a conversation I had with my students during play time.

Heather: Girls what are you playing over here?
Diana: I'm a princess, and I'm going shopping with my baby
(she is holding a baby doll)
Jonae: Yeah and I'm the Mama. See my pretty dress.
Heather: Oh you girls look just fabulous! Do you have other
Friends playing with you?
Diana: Yes! Natalia is my Titi
Natalia: See I'm the Titi, I got on the fancy dress. My Titi
likes to wear a fancy dress to church.
Heather: Natalia you used a "Juicy" word to describe your
dress. I like that.
Jonae: Can we put that word on are "juicy" word wall? I
Look fancy too right?
Heather: Sure girls that's a great idea, good thinking.

Dramatic play is a meaningful engaging way to invite children to use their imaginations, transform into their favorite characters, as well as meaningful people in their lives. When children are invited to dress up into various costumes, they can become anyone they want. Whether it is their favorite teacher, a family member or a fairy princess dressing up is a social experience that is a meaningful part of play time.

It also can stimulate children to create their own stories and plays. Rowe (2007) explains that in dramatic play, children pretend as if real-world objects and people had other identities. He also states that effective book related play is a way to make connections between the children's pretend play, real life scenarios and the literature they read. Paley (2004) explains that there is no activity for which young children are more prepared for than fantasy play. Paley (2004) also states that this is nothing more risk-free and dependable than pretend play. Bringing in what they know to create new experiences.

My classroom is in an urban elementary school. This K-6 school has a large amount of English language learners, and English for Speakers of other Languages. Many students in my building are bilingual, or just learning how to speak English for the first time. The student population includes other diverse cultures and ethnicities such as, Caucasian, African American, and Muslim children. The total population of the student body is 670 students. Within my classroom, I have nine girls and 14 boys. Also, there are five children who receive ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) services. For this I have an ESOL teacher who pushes in for services during my writing block daily for an hour. Out of the 23 children, 11 of them are from Puerto Rican homes and are bilingual. Ten children are African American and one child is Caucasian.

Observation is already a large part of how I assess my students. I take anecdotal notes throughout my daily routine my students. I carry post-its around with my clipboard and document things that I find interesting or important knowledge about my students. By the middle of the school year know the children as individuals.

How they work, play and socialize is how I plan many learning activities. I have found that my students learn well by doing hands on-activities. They enjoy centers and crafts. I also have observed that they have a strong knowledge base from kindergarten. I incorporated these types of learning activities into my study. I used five different picture books that all have characters that enjoy dressing up, use dramatic play and their imaginations in the stories. Thus, I was curious to see if by using these types of literature with my students can they bring these characters out by incorporating them within their dramatic play, and the all the areas of literacy.

Significance of the Problem

I have learned through my many years and an early childhood provider and educator that social skills are essential for a child's learning development. In my first two years of teaching I witnessed that any kind of play in the early childhood classroom was becoming non-existent. Within the Urban charter school where I started my teaching career, I was mandated to teach all day. There was not much room for playtime within the daily practice of their learning day. I was told to teach and test all the time. I had to show results and keep them obedient and structured. This made me uncomfortable and out of place from my inquiry based instruction I was taught in my undergraduate program. This is when I first started wondering where play in the classroom had gone? Once I changed school districts and became a part of a school that is inquiry based I was thrilled to see early childhood children having time to play during their school day. While teaching kindergarten I asked myself the question that is now my research question. How can dramatic play

enhance literacy development? I feel that, no better way to build on a child's social development than inviting them to play. Paley (2004) states that, within dramatic play, language become more clear and natural, allowing children to connect with more fluency and curiosity, the words and phrases they know to new ideas. She also explains that "fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing skills (p.8)". I feel that it has become a visual staple within early childhood classrooms where play is losing its stamina and being replaced with more structured instruction. I have experienced that instruction is less hands on and more focused on the standardized test phenomenon. Early childhood teachers have had to step up their curriculums to engage the students in higher level thinking at an earlier age. It has come so far as teachers calling kindergarten "the new first grade." Research has indicated that most types of play are become scarce throughout the early childhood classrooms. Miller and Almon (2009), state that child-initiated play must be restored to kindergarten. They continue to discuss that the vital importance in young children's development has shown in study after study, unfortunately many people believe that play is a waste of time in school. It is a place for learning and there is plenty of time to play at home. Research has shown that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language development. The power of play is a positive teaching tool for the emergent reader.

Through this study, I investigated how dramatic play can enhance literacy development of all my first grade students. I wanted to look deeper into the ideas of how play and literacy go hand and hand. A hands on inquiry based learning is a

philosophy I use within my daily practice. I create hands on learning for my students to build on their prior knowledge while learning new topics. I have experienced that bringing a lesson to life by using props, photographs, and materials to touch are both engaging and build a lasting foundation for their future learning experiences. I wanted show how giving children opportunities to engage in drama, using costumes and props, would stimulate literacy development. Play scenarios can ripple into reading, writing, vocabulary development and social skill as they incorporate what they played into a literacy based lesson that I will present to them. According to Wohlend (2009) “a toy is (a) a text to be read, performed, and consumed with meanings suggested by its materials and its history of attached story lines and practiced and (b) a text to be written, produced, and revised as children improvise new meaning through play.” Wohlend, (2009) recognizes that, when children play together, they assign, negotiate, and maintain symbolic pretend meanings for objects consistent with the imagined setting.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to observe the connections between dramatic play and literacy connections within my classroom. I invited my students to create meaningful dramatic play by inviting them to play with the dress up clothes and props during designated play times throughout our school week. The students can chose to play with the dress up clothes as part of the play centers. This takes place within our classroom at the carpet area. I do not have a housekeeping or kitchen area that the

clothes are stored in. I keep the dress up clothes in two large bins. When the children choose that center they bring the bins over to the carpet area of our classroom. During this time the children involved create their own pretend play with the materials inside the box. Due to the space it is difficult to have more than five or six children at a time playing at the center. Both the girls and boys choose this center for their playtime. I have clothes for both genders. Some examples of the clothes are various fancy dresses, dance costumes, firefighter shirts, men's work shirts, grass skirts and shoes.

I used literature within a shared reading and writing, read aloud, and guided reading lessons to trigger prior knowledge from their play in the dress-up area. This promoted conversations, building on new vocabulary as the students made connections between dramatic play and literacy activities.

By bringing books and the books characters to life through literacy-related play, children can use their literacy abilities to develop new skills within a social hand on context. I feel that children can use a play and literacy relationship to build on prior knowledge, language skills, comprehension, visual letters and social interactions with peers. Research has shown that some children, particularly those from low income families, seldom engage in dramatic play in classroom settings unless special intervention programs are implemented (Dansky, 1980; Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977; Smilanski, 1968, p. 543 as cited in Christie, 1990). Christie also explains that the way to take full advantage of children's dramatic play experiences is to use it as a segway for literacy development. Awareness needs to be given to three main factors; 1: setting in which the play occurs. 2: the time that is given for these play activities, and 3: the way the teacher is involved with these play episodes.

The idea for my research is based on the constructivist theories of literacy and play. An article by (Saracho & Spodek, 2006) explain that researchers such as Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner focus on the meaning of children's development and behavior, within the culture context that ultimately influences both literacy and play. The article by Sarscho & Spodek, (2006) states that, Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist believed that play affects more than the children's cognitive development. Piaget states that in spontaneous play, children accommodate the world into their mental structures. Within play and literacy children can recall facts and experiences maintained in memory to generate new meanings in context, whether three-dimensional as in play or two-dimensional as in text (Roskos & Christie, 2001, as cited in Saracho and Spodek, 2006). Bronfenbrenner (1979) state that children confront conditions that affect directly and indirectly the child-environment interaction. In play, both the environment and the socially held beliefs of play affect young children's learning within literacy and other subjects (Saracho and Spodek, 2006).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Literacy programs are important aspects of school curriculum. Young children are constantly learning throughout many different genres and social experiences while they are in school. The rationale for reading is not exclusively just to finish a book, but to enjoy the characters, stories and great authors. The following research demonstrates that inviting children to "play" and use their imagination will stimulate their reading and writing skills in a positive way. Role playing, dressing-up, friendly

discussions, and playful play can all invite the learner to explore the world of reading and writing as a enjoyable learning experience.

Why Dramatic Play is important in Early Childhood

There are a number of reasons why play and emergent literacy go hand and hand. Using creative pedagogies by integrating arts within teaching is a powerful way to introduce play into the curriculum. Moon and Reifel (2008) explored how role playing and play activities served as a positive learning tool for students from diverse language backgrounds. The teachers' were from a public pre-kindergarten school, taught children from diverse backgrounds. The researchers wanted to find out if multiple diverse backgrounds, affected the developmentally appropriate practices of a classrooms daily literacy instruction. The study's findings support the idea that different types of play and the arts help to enrich lessons in early childhood classrooms. Interactive play and literacy enriched classrooms can stimulate opportunities for children to learn meaningful skills in literacy. Moon and Reifel (2008) investigated how teachers construct their discourse about play in the classroom by wanting to look into how the teachers understood play and emergent literacy learning and intergraded these ideas into their daily work with children. The researchers found that the teachers supported play through use of the literacy curriculum. The playful learning experiences brought together relationships between home and school structures, and students made connections from home into their play at school. This invited the teachers to bring their play experiences into literacy lessons. The teachers within this study valued children's cooperative learning with

their peers. They invited them to express themselves either orally or in writing and drawing their thought and ideas about their understanding of lessons taught. The children appeared to be engaged in literacy related activities when they knew the teachers routines and expectations. The manipulative activities created were hands-on learning centers which kept the children's attentions spans. This helped their learning process because the activities were both engaging and developmentally appropriate for the learners.

Young (2009) discussed the importance of providing positive literacy learning environments that sustain the development of emergent literacy understandings in early childhood settings. This study has three main components which were teacher professional learning, university personnel and teachers working together and developing partnerships for learning with parents. This study took place within two Catholic primary schools one in North Queensland and the other in Brisbane, Australia. Four preschool teachers and 87 students were a part of this study. Data was collected by screening the students' son print-based emergent literacy understanding. Interviews of all the participating teachers were also given. Young used a design-based methodology for this study. Young (2009) utilized both qualitative and quantitative data to study how to enhance emergent literacy opportunities for young children. Incorporating literacy-based activities within their students play enable teachers to focus on developing literacy understandings by using reading and writing strategies such as environmental print. The teachers label objects that the children played with and used throughout the learning day was one way to engage preschool-aged students into authentic reading activities. Young also looked at the effects of

children's emergent literacy learning and teachers' perceptions of their own learning. The findings from Young's study found that, children are very observant, and can extend their learning far beyond the expectations of the teacher. Young found that the children were constantly increasing their vocabulary, learning from others, used language to get things done all the while finding out about the symbol systems of their everyday world.

Using theatrical activities to engage reluctant readers is a purposeful way to incorporate play into literacy. There are many different theater activities that a teacher can use to help build a student's involvement in literacy. Reader's Theater is one example of a way to bring role playing and literacy together. Using theater to engage the reluctant reader can be enriching for both students and teachers. According to Brinda (2008), who examined significances of theater activities done in the classroom and through theater field trips, theater experiences could make reading meaningful, attainable, and enjoyable for reluctant readers. Brinda looked at two diverse groups of unenthusiastic adolescent readers from both urban and suburban school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This four month study examined how a collaborative program with both teachers and theater directors can help adolescent students' skills with comprehension and visualizing. Brinda (2008) designed literature circles and had the students and teachers work closely with theater directors for the play, "*A Wrinkle in Time*". Using observations, interviews and discussions with both students and teachers he was able to create data for his study. Brinda (2008) stated that these learning engagements are pedagogically sound methods to address literacy issues. Brinda (2008) also stated that by combining reading with seeing, students found ways

to immerse themselves in the actions, thoughts, and dialogue of characters, as well as the settings, sounds and symbols of literature. Teachers as well as the students found the theater experiences to be purposeful and engaging. Furthermore, the implications of the theater experience were that teachers and students discovered how reading literature can be meaningful and enjoyable. Brinda (2008) explained that the teachers also discovered that for reluctant readers reading works best as a group activity.

Dramatic play occurs when children adopt roles and use make-believe to act out stories. Interacting with dramatic play invites these reluctant readers to engage in language rich activities. Dramatic play is a meaningful engaging way to invite students to use their imaginations, transform into their favorite characters and meaningful people in their lives. When students are invited to dress up using various costumes, they can become anyone they want. Whether it is their favorite teacher, a family member or a fairy princess, dressing up is a social experience that involves the use of language and problem solving skills, and stimulates children to create their own stories and plays.

In addition to these educational studies, Paley (2004) has done extensive observations of play in her early childhood classrooms. There is no activity for which young children are better prepared than imaginative play. Nothing is more reliable and harmless, and the dangers are only pretend. Paley (2004) also explains that dramatic play is often spontaneous, which invites young children to use language in authentic and purposeful ways and to communicate with greater fluency and curiosity. This type of play can bring in new ideas, words experiences that build their literacy development.

As children play together they develop and expand one another's social skills. It creates language development, social skills and can build on themes throughout the classroom curriculum. Paley (2004) explains that fantasy play is the glue that brings together all the pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing. Furthermore, Paley states that fantasy play is a part of the growth of cognitive, narrative, and social connectivity in young children. It sets the stage for experiences that are a positive component of their natural development.

Similar to Palay (2004), Miller and Almore (2009), found that young children work hard at their play. They are inventing scenes, stories and solving problems while also negotiating their way through social situations. The researchers discuss how research shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language development, better social skills, and imagination. The power of play is a tool for learning and is an essential force for young children's physical, social and emotional development.

Dramatic Play is a meaningful engagement for learning

Christie (1990) calls upon other researchers to state: "A growing body of research indicates that when children are given an opportunity to engage in dramatizations in "literate" play settings stocked with reading and writing materials, they readily incorporate literacy into their play (Hall, May, Moores, Shearer, & Williams, 1987; Isenberg & Jacob, 1983; Roskos, 1988; Schrader, 1989)."

Dramatic play can be a source of expression and stimulate literacy learning for young children. Rowe (2001) looked at how book-related dramatic play had the

potential to stimulate literacy activities and found that inviting play to be a part of learning allowed students to explore books by playing. Data was collected during a nine month research project that tracked two and three year olds' literacy experiences in their preschool classroom. She also did a case study of her son's literacy development from birth through age four. She did her school based data in a middle class setting. Her home-based data was collected through a 13 month period starting at her son's second birthday. Rowe's rationale for having two data sets was to provide a versatile view of book-related play that takes place. Children can build on prior knowledge to make text-to-text, text-to-self and text-to-world connections while working with literature. Rowe discussed that the multiple sign systems which include talking and making gestures provide ways for children's to express themselves and found that, when students use book-related dramatic play, they bring meaningful content to literacy learning.

In her book, *Bringing home Reggio Emilia*, an innovative approach to early childhood education Cadwell (1997) discussed Reggio Emilia, the innovative approach to early childhood education, from Italy. Cadwell (1997) offers many vivid examples of how Reggio Emilia educators create meaningful learning engagements through use of dramatic play, creative art, and communication. In these classrooms, teachers listen carefully to the way children identify and understand the world around them, even using that as a starting point for learning, and they respond with both gratitude and the enthusiasm to help children build on and develop what they understand. In addition to playful exploration through the arts, imagination and creativity build on reading and writing in a beneficial way. For example, Tarr,

Bjartveit, Kostiuk and McCown (2009) conducted a study that provided powerful evidence the role pedagogical documentation can play in supporting students' imagination, creativity and deeper thinking. This collaborative study was done by using three teachers who taught in early childhood classrooms. The teachers' observations, documentation and feedback from this study enabled the researchers to discover the importance of imagination and fantasy play within the educational lives of children. This article uses the ideas inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood. A text written by Cadwell (1997) explains that children have the right to use multiple types of materials in order to discover and converse while also having a sense of wonder, feelings, questions and imagination. Inviting children to use all these emotions, allow their thinking to be visible through their natural "languages". A teacher that is knowledgeable in the visual arts is able to work closely with children and teachers to enable the children to use inquiry based learning to make their learning visible.

The importance of connecting dramatic play and literacy is evident in an article written by Roskos, Christie, and Richgels (2003). The authors investigate the general benefits of play for children's literacy developments. Within this article these authors discuss the basic benefits of play in children's literacy development. They explain that literacy rich environments expose children to many meaningful and valuable learning opportunities. They discuss the learning experiences such shared reading lessons that help the children learn about story plot. Discussion before, during and after reading are important engagements for emergent readers. Other literacy ideas are interactive storytelling, dramatic role playing, and play-related writing

materials. This article gives essential teaching strategies that provide preschool children developmentally appropriate settings, materials, social support, and meaningful experiences to encourage early reading and writing.

Using pop culture stories such as characters from popular television shows and movies such as, Dora the Explorer and Spiderman can bring connections, social practices, and drawings and play interactions for the students within the classroom. Wohlwend (2009) studied literacy play in kindergarten classrooms in the United States early childhood to investigate the discourse of children's writing and play interactions with the Disney Princess dolls and Disney Princess stories. This study took place within a kindergarten classroom with 21 students and one teacher. The students were given opportunities to play during writing workshop. Wohlwend found that the children brought their prior knowledge about the Disney characters into their writing. The teachers also incorporated story boards using the Disney characters, and facilitated chains of animating and authoring, linking meaning from one story to another. Moreover, the students used their Disney play and stories to compile drawings, writing and interactive literacy engagements such as storyboards of fairytales, play scripts, authoring, and writer's workshop.

Dramatic Play and Popular Culture

Marsh (1999) did a similar study to investigate the effects of popular culture in a socio-dramatic role play area. Marsh (1999) explained that children's interest in what they read and write is influenced from popular culture. Television, video games, movies and comics have an enormous impact on what children want to read and write

about. Marsh looked at dramatic play times in two classrooms within a nursery school. There were 57 boys and girls ages six and seven year olds in this study. Children chose theme based character roles such as “Batman and Batwoman” while they played. . The dramatic play areas were furnished with screens, drapes and other costumes to portray the pop culture story line of Batman. Marsh also observed that the children were able to bring literacy-based materials into their play. The children brought notebooks, paper, pens, and pencils into their dramatic play setting. The use of pop culture stimulated the discourse of the child, which brought out dramatic play and stories. Marsh found that the children took in literacy activities such as within their role playing. They engaged in reading and writing activities related to the Batman theme. They had interest in the curriculum and were engaged in the literacy activities within the classroom.

Another educator who supports learning through play is Lisa Murphy (2006) In her book, titled *Play* she stated that when dressing up and playing in the house corner, children are learning about manners, social skills and valuable communication skills. They are increasing their creativity while pretending and enhancing their imaginations. Murphy (2006) also explains that children have to create memories, make connections with characters, and get lost in the fantasy of a story. According to Murphy, simply having a book corner in a classroom does not promote a love for reading. She discussed that the purpose of reading is not only to just finish the book, but also to enjoy the great stories that the authors present. Murphy says that changing the names in a story by substituting the name(s) of someone in the class for characters in the story can be a way to play with the words in the story. Bringing the book to life

by acting out the characters is a meaningful way for the children to make meaningful connections between real life and fantasy. It invites the children to make text –to-text, text-to-self and text-to- world connections.

Art, Dramatic Play and Imaginary Play

In addition to recognizing how popular culture can stimulate dramatic play and literacy, the students are also benefits to incorporating creative, visual art into their play and literacy lessons. According to Ahn and Filipenko (2007), children’s art work and play can be building blocks for their narrative skills. Children’s narratives are a vital form through which children describe their own experiences and correspond to their views of the world. Ahn and Flipenko found that children’s play and drawings are an interpretation of their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Children’s narratives, written within a natural setting, encouraged the child to tell, draw and write their stories stimulating literacy development. Play is a time when fantasy and shared story-telling instinctively occurs. There study was done within a half day kindergarten class. The researchers observed the children’s narrative talk and play episodes that took place during their free choice time. As the children brought their play experiences into their narrative drawings and writing, it showed that the children explored many different perspectives about themselves as they situated themselves in their world.

Grant, Hutchison, Hornsby, and Brooke (2008) also found that creative pedagogies such as art-full reading and writing create positive learning experiences for early readers. Their study focused on how incorporating art-based activities such

as into reading and writing can stimulate creative, holistic pedagogies. Activities such as role-playing support language and literacy development. After the end of the study, the researchers found that teachers had an understanding of children's creative art abilities. The students were engaged in attending, seeing, thinking and using language in ways that opened up multiple connections with diverse text. Previous playful explorations in the arts can promote reading and writing. (Grant, et.al) explain that these playful opportunities invite the student to build on strategies for attending, connecting, predicting and confirming. These skills are what teachers have students practice in their balanced reading and writing program.

Bringing books to life is a way to make what the child is reading come alive using the characters to build on literacy activities and enriching their creativity. Rowe (2007) conducted a study using preschool children. This study provides meaningful confirmation that dramatic play is an important piece of young children's literacy learning. Rowe (2007) explains that in dramatic play, children pretend as if real life objects and people had other identities. She defines that book-related dramatic play is a symbolic transformation that explicitly or implicitly reflects the meaning signed in books' text or illustrations. Rowe found that there are two lines of research investigating theoretical connections between dramatic play and books. She found that one of the most noticeable ways children connected books to play was through active, physical search for book-related toys and props.

Learning, Symbolic Play and the Theoretical Background of Play and Learning

Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, and Lander (2009) examined the characteristics of learning through playful activities. The researchers discovered the links between children's play and their development of metacognitive and self-regulatory skills. These connections allow for teachers to get an understanding of the relationship between pretend and symbolic play, and how it is an important learning piece for their students. The researchers discussed how the development of metacognitive and self-regulatory skills is crucially vital in a child's academic growth, which involves intended learning, problem solving and creativity. The researchers found significant evidence within the psychological literature that supports the role that pretend play or symbolic play has had inside educational learning environment. Symbolic play refers to an object that a child uses during dramatic play that they substitute for another object. For example, when a child uses a marker for a microphone that is considered symbolic play, whereas, pretend play is when children use their imaginations to create stories that are not true to real life such as fairy tales and magic kingdoms.

Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, and Lander (2009) supported the ideas of, Saracho and Spodek (2005). They looked at, children's use of play. They explore children's developing conceptions of the purpose and characteristics of print in the preschool years. During play young children use language and literacy skills. A play and literacy relationship emerges when play assists young children to discover and understand the connections between these two realms. At an early age young children are able to accomplish many transactions in dealing with text by using their

prior knowledge of language, literature and the world. “Metacognitive and self-regulatory development is crucially important in the development of academic skills which involve intentional learning, problem-solving and creativity. An understanding of the relationship between pretend or symbolic play and self-regulation is also helpful in providing clear guidelines for adults working with young children as regards their roles in supporting and encouraging play in educational contexts”(p.40). Within play, children recall facts and experiences maintained in memory to generate new meanings in context, whether three-dimensional as in play or two-dimensional as in text (Roskos & Christie, 2001, as cited in Saracho and Spodek, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner stated “that children confront conditions that affect directly and indirectly the child-environment interaction. “In play, both the environment and the socially held beliefs of play affect young children’s learning within literacy and other subjects”(p.710). In addition to the theoretical background given by Saracho and Spodek, Roskos, Cristie and Richgels (2003) cite Bodrova and Leong (1998) and discuss how the Vygotskian approach to creating dramatic play activities helps children self-regulate their behaviors. They deliberately focus on their children’s play-foundational cognitive skills of reading and writing. Cognitive development focuses on a child’s development in terms of information processing skills, conceptual resources, perceptual skills and language learning.

These researchers discuss the work of Vygotsky (1978) and his ideas about dramatic play and children’s cognitive development. Vygotsky, relates play to children’s developing a sense of control and self-regulation of their own learning. While a child plays a child creates their own “zone of proximal development” which

is the difference between what the learner can do without help and what he/she can do with help. While children play they are in control of their own learning. Vygotsky (1978) also explains that play makes important contributions to the development of symbolic representation. The understanding of the theory of self-regulation, play and cognition is helpful for educator to build meaningful lesson, activities and classroom environments for early emergent readers and writers.

Looking at Students' Interests through Play

When an emergent reader can write or draw about a topic he/she interested in, it stimulates his/her prior knowledge and engages them in writing. Children bring in their personal interest through their play. Rowe and Neitzel (2010) explored ways two and three year olds bring their interests and likes into writing events in their preschool setting. The researchers noticed how the powerful role of adults, culture and media effected preschool age children's participation in literacy events. The researchers explored the relationships between children's play and writing activities even at an early age. Inviting students to write or draw about topics of interest helped keep their attention and excitement about the lessons.

Neitzel, Alexander and Johnson (2008) looked at the interest of kindergarteners. They examined the students' patterns of conceptual social, procedural and creative interest and found consistently that between the two types of information, the students offered more in class discussions based on their interest. As cited in Neitzel, Alexander and Johnson (2008), "children's personalities, cognitive abilities, and motivational dispositions have all been linked to their academic

behaviors (Bjorklund & Schneider, 1996) and interests have been credited as the bridge linking cognitive, motivation, and academic outcomes (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Pekran, Goetz, Titz & Perry (2002)).” The participants were one hundred nine children; this included 58 boys and 51 girls. These children were all entering kindergarten in the next school year. The children were four years old. The researchers took data from the children’s personal characteristics and the activities that they did at home. The collection was done over a 12 month time period. Then as the children entered kindergarten they were observed during their classroom activities as well. The researchers looked at the children’s temperament, cognitive skills, and children’s interest-based activities in the home. The findings showed that there are complex connections between children’s interest-based activities in the home that link early engagement in kindergarten. The children who showed process-oriented interests gave suggestions and provided rationales during class discussions and actively wanted task-process information more frequently than did children with other interest directions. The children in the study who had socially oriented interest many times made connections and associations during class discussions. Thus, utilizing the idea that child’s interests both at home and school can engage early learners into meaningful connections between the context in school and their interests at home.

Summary

During dramatic play students adopt roles, language and behaviors, and use their imagination to act out stories. During these sessions, students can make meaningful connections with literacy. Play situations invite students to incorporate literacy by using story characters, theater, and pop culture characters.

I have presented a variety of research in this chapter that indicates the importance of inviting students to engage in dramatic play experiences. My examination of the research and literature has shown me that using dramatic play to enhance literacy development can be very effective. I have discovered that there are many ways to invite students to read and write through play. These researchers provided solid evidence that states, imaginative, dramatic and social play can enhance an emergent reader's literacy development. Based on my review of the literature, I believe that giving young children the opportunities to engage in literacy-related play should be a component of every early childhood program.

Chapter Three: Methods/Study Design

This study was designed to explore dramatic play within a first grade classroom. I investigated how dramatic play can enhance a child's literacy development. I created opportunities during their school day for my students to play with dress up clothes and props while also exploring five particular storybook characters that play dress up as well. Lessons and activities were created to see if the students could make text to self connections, text to world connections, and text to text connections. Then I offered literacy lessons where the students could use their knowledge about these characters and their play to create meaningful response to literature writing pieces, shared writing as a whole group about one of the books, large and small group discussions about their connections, and re-reading their writing pieces to their peers in an "Authors Chair" activity.

Participants and Context

I conducted this research in my first grade classroom in an urban city elementary school in western New York. The school is a K-6 school with one bilingual classroom at each grade level. The population of the student body is 625. The demographics of my building are as follows, 46% African American, 40% Hispanic/Latino, 12% Caucasian, 1% Asian, and 1% other. There 32 total classrooms within this school. Seven of them are bilingual, having one at every grade. All of the bilingual classes are integrated classes and have Special Education teachers in them. Three classrooms are classrooms which the children have Autistic Spectrum Disorder. 19% of the students are classified for special education. 2% are in self contained. 23% of the students are in the bilingual program. 266 of the students are Hispanic (mostly

Spanish speaking), 190 of the students are in the ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) program. In academics the buildings core reading program is Houghton Mifflin. K-6 follows the Rochester Instructional Frameworks which is a workshop based model. Our math program is Investigations for K-5 and Connected Math for grade 6. Most of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch and all the children are offered and full breakfast daily.

My classroom is a single room on the first floor of the two story building. The classroom is bright and colorful with many artifacts. I have a word wall located on the back wall of my classroom. I make sure that my classroom has meaningful environmental print. It has high frequency words that the children know and use while writing. I also have a content area vocabulary wall that goes along with the content that is being studied at the time. There are numbers and number words located on the wall with essential math vocabulary words that we are studying. Labels are placed on each learning center for example; math center, computer center and listening center all have signs with a graphic and words for the children to visually see. I created a writing resource wall. Here is where I placed a poster of “Things to write about” that the children and I made together. I also have the writing traits posted as well as all the writing components that we have to follow for our curriculum. During this study the students and I created a new concept poster for our writing wall. We call it “The Fantastic 4” This poster has four main features that the students need to remember when they are beginning a new writing piece: 1: Write your name, 2: Use figure spaces , 3: Capitals at the beginning of each sentence, 4: Punctuation. The idea for the title came from our book about playing a superhero. We needed a catchy

title for the poster. While we brain stormed, I asked the students to think of something that has to do with four. One of the boys suggested the “Fantastic 4” superheroes and it was perfect. For guided reading and center rotations the children must look at and read the rotation chart to see where their group goes for each rotation. They know where to find their name and the centers are labeled with both a picture and word.

My students work is very precious to me. I want them to be proud of their work. I place their writing pieces, crafts and other content area work up around the room and out in the hallway outside our room. The children sit at desks. They are grouped in small pods of three to four students each. There is a carpet area where read aloud, shared reading and writing and classroom group activities take place. However, the area available for children to play in is small and there is not room for a full dramatic play center. The props and dramatic play costumes are stored in large plastic bins that are brought out during play time sessions. The dress up boxes, come out about one to two times a week. Usually Friday afternoons during our “Friday Fun” choice playtime the dress up boxes come out and the students gather around the boxes.

I invited all of my students: nine girls and 14 boys to participate in this study. The students range from ages five to six years old and are from low to middle-income families. There are five children who receive ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) services. For this I have an ESOL teacher who pushes in for services during my writing block daily for an hour. Out of the 23 children, 11 of them are from Puerto Rican homes and are bilingual. Ten children are African American and one child is Caucasian. The children who receive ESOL services are bilingual and

speak Spanish. There are also about five other children within my classroom that can speak Spanish as well. All of the children are at the emergent levels of both reading and writing. They are mostly all reading at a middle first grade DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment) with five reading at a beginning and with five students reading at an end of first grade level.

The other participants were be two female kindergarten teachers who teach at my school. One of the teachers has been teaching for 25 years and the other has been teaching for 11 years. I have has the opportunity to co-teach with these teachers in the past and would like their views on play in the classroom. I also interviewed families of my students who be participating. I sent home a parent survey in which I asked questions related to how their child plays at home. Such as, do they play with siblings, neighborhood children or alone.

My Personality as the Researcher

I have been a first grade teacher within this urban city school district for three years. I completed my undergrad work in May 2005 and have a bachelor's degree in Sociology and early childhood teaching certification. This is my fifth year of teaching. For my first two years of teaching, I taught at a local urban charter elementary school (2006-2008) in which I was a first grade teacher. Following the two years at the charter school, I was hired at my current urban school district. I taught in a co-teaching position in a kindergarten classroom for the 2008 and 2009

school years. I then looped with that kindergarten class to first grade for the 2009-2010 school years. I am currently still teaching in the same classroom and grade.

Prior to teaching elementary school, I taught pre-school students within childcare settings for 15 years. In 1992, I acquired my Child Development Associate (CDA).

I have been working with early childhood children since 1991. In 2005, while in the last semester of my undergraduate studies, I did an independent study with my early childhood professor. In the study I investigated the importance of the arts being used within a cross-curricular program within an early childhood classroom. Throughout this study, I found that the arts are an important staple within early childhood curriculum. They can be used to promote inquiry based learning throughout all subject areas including literacy. I have used the findings and the experience generated from that study to further guide my instruction.

The final piece of this study was to take what I learned and share it with other early childhood educators. I gave an in-service session to childcare providers at a daycare center where I worked. I gave them ideas for ways to incorporate different types of art in their early childhood classroom. Using media such as music, dramatic play, and graphic art young children can learn about many aspects of art.

Play in the early childhood classroom is an essential part of a child's learning development. It can be a powerful tool to incorporate many context of learning such as acting out a story using props and costumes to playing with manipulative to build a geometric shape structure. I have experienced that play can be a foundation that

can support a higher part of learning. I feel that it invites children to explore social situations, develop language skills and build on fine and large motor skills. Play can look different to many people. Murphy (2006) explains that play to an adult, can be engaging in a fun activity that has a concrete result or an end product such as making a quilt, planting a garden, playing in a sports game or running a marathon. Whereas, children preserve play very different. Child play is filled with loose parts, bits, pieces, balls, rocks, dolls, mud, water, bikes and skates. I feel that it is important for children to be invited to have meaningful play time. Murphy (2006) also states that, "Playing is the cement that holds our foundation of creating, moving, singing, discussing, observing and reading together and cement needs time to dry so the foundation can be solid and sturdy (146)."

The purpose of this study was to see if dramatic play can enhance literacy. When children play dress up they are using many of the components of literacy. They learn how to create social roles and valuable communication skills. The children are listening, speaking and viewing while they use pretend play. Play is an essential component to their learning development.

Procedures of Study

Over the course of this six week study, I created play time experiences that lasted about 30 minutes each during specific times the children's school day. I invited the children to play with the dramatic play prop boxes. The boxes are full of costumes, dolls, and other accessories that they can use to create pretend play scenarios and make connections to their lives and the stories that they will hear within

the other aspects of the study. These activities allowed me to capture my students freely playing with the dress up clothes and props.

A large part of this study revolved around the children's literature that I read to the class. The stories included fictional characters that enjoy dress up play, use their imaginations, and play with their friends. The picture books are an important staple within early childhood curriculum. They can be used to promote inquiry based learning throughout all subject areas including literacy. I have used the findings and the experience generated from that study to further guide my instruction.

Alice the Fairy by David Shannon (2004) this story is about a little girl who dresses up as a fairy and uses her strong imagination to create her own fairy world with her family members.

Fancy Nancy, by Jane O'Conner and Robin Glasser (2005) is about a character who believes that more is always better when it comes to being fancy.

Ladybug Girl Dresses up by David Soman and Jacky Davis (2008) Ladybug Girl is Lulu, a little girl who loves to dress in a ladybug costume.

Princess Grace(2008) by Mary Hoffman, Cornelius Van Wright and illustrated by Ying Hwa Hu is the story of how two girls will be

selected as princesses in the town parade, and Grace can't wait to be one of them.

Kapow by George O'Connor (2007), is about a young boy realizes what it really means to be a superhero.

I used these texts during shared reading and read aloud activities to help stimulate the student's prior knowledge of dressing in costumes at home and at school. These text also invited the students to consider how playing dress up can help with conflicts with friends, family and other social issues that they might have. I wanted the children to be brought into these stories, get to know these characters and bring them to life in our classroom. This was an invitation for the students to make the connections from their dramatic play in the classroom to the characters in the stories. I used large chart paper to record the children's' responses of comparing and contrasting their play and the characters' play. During writer's workshop, I invited the children to write and illustrate their understanding of what they like about the stories. Many lessons were planned for the students to build on their connections with the stories and their play. The students shared their writing with the class during "Authors Chair" sessions. Students had ongoing opportunities to read their work and display their illustrations over the course of six weeks.

During their dramatic play time, I took pictures and anecdotal notes to capture their conversations with each other, and to observe the ways they dress up together and the characters that they created. During this study I sent home a parent survey. I asked my families questions about their dramatic play experiences at home, "How do

your children play at home?” “Do they ever get to play dress up or wear costumes?” “How often does your child play freely?” These questions allowed me to see how my students use play at home compared to the way they play at school. I also gathered data by interviewing the kindergarten teachers at my school. I am interested to know if they feel dramatic play is important to their classroom daily practice. I would like to get their feedback on my research question.

Unit Plan Activities:

In week one, I read *Alice the Fairy* (2004) by David Shannon. As a class discussed the character “Alice”, I had the children compare the way Alice dresses up to the way they play dress up. Large chart paper was used to record the children’s comparing and contrasting between their play and the characters play. I made a Venn diagram to record the students’ responses. I asked the students; How does Alice play dress up? How do we play dress up? How are the two the same? Next, primary style writing paper was used to invite the children to illustrate and write their understanding of the activity. These activities took place throughout one week. At the end of the week I invite the children to share their writing pieces with the class. Their work was displayed up on the wall with the Venn diagram for the remainder of the study.

In week two, I read *Princess Grace* (2008) the students and I discussed the differences between real princess and fairy tale princess. I provided real photos of princesses and princes so that the students can view real royalty throughout the world.

I also provided extra books on fairy tale princesses and princes so that the children could compare them like Grace and her friends do in the text. These pictures and books will be placed in the browsing book box for the week. Students will be invited to use look at them, use them in their writing and illustrations. I will also place crowns, wands, and fairy wings in the prop boxes. The students will complete a picture sort of real princesses and princesses to pretend princesses and princes. At the end of this week the students will watch “Princess and the Frog” by Disney. After the book was read, we did a poster size picture sort. This consisted of two sections; real royalty and pretend royalty. I had photos of real royalty throughout our world and fairytale royalty. I invited the class to sort the photos into the proper sections. This poster was then placed onto our unit bulletin board for display. Next, I created an individual picture sort. I gave the students eight photos of royalty. Four were real and four were not. I then had a sorting mat for them to cut and paste the photos to. I focused on the story vocabulary; “royalty, fantasy, pretend”.

The next week introduced the book *Kapow* (2007) by George O'Connor. As I read this graphic comic style picture book I asked the students if they had ever seen a real comic book before. We discussed what the caption bubbles meant and compared the layout of this book compared to the regular picture books that they are used to reading. I also discussed with the students the characters in this story. The main character that is dressing up is a boy. I invited the children to compare his character to those of the first two stories from the unit. We also discussed the idea of real vs. fantasy. I made a graphic organizer with them to compare what is real in this story to what is a fantasy. During this week I also place Super Hero

costumes into the dress up boxes. I will observe if the students will act out the story “Kapow”. I brought in small blankets and material which we made capes like the characters do in the story.

The next book that I introduced was *Fancy Nancy* (2005) by Robin Glasser. I read the story dressed up in fancy clothes. I asked the students to think about why I was dressed this way prior to reading the story. Next, I introduced the word “fancy” to our vocabulary within the text. After reading the story I invited the students to write about how they dress fancy like Nancy and her family did. I encouraged them to use the fancy vocabulary. This writing lesson was on adding details and word choice to their writing. Once the children completed their illustration and writing piece, they were invited to share their writing during an “author’s chair”. In the dress up boxes I added feathered boas and more fancy clothes that the students could wear.

The last book was *Lady Bug Girl* (2008). This was another read aloud to the whole group. The students made text to text connections from all the books within this unit. I once again invited them to write a response to this story. Once the children completed their illustration and writing piece, they were invited to share their writing during an “author’s chair”.

The culminating activity was a small group activity. On large chart paper I set up a topic web for each story. The graphic organizers were then filled out by the students in each group. The five graphic organizers were put up in front of the room. Each group discussed their own graphic organizer to the class. After the students were

invited to write one last writing piece, they chose their favorite book and wrote why they liked it. An illustration also was part of the activity.

Data Collection

Data for this study was taken in a multiple of ways. The children were invited to play during “Choice time” with the dramatic play props. Also, the students took place in various whole group and small group instructional lessons and activities based on the topic.

Photographing Student Play

Photographs were taken of the children during their play to get specific documentation of their dramatic play sessions. I will be using pictures to capture the children’s interactions with each other, and the costumes and props they used during their play.

Anecdotal Observations

Various written anecdotal observations were taken using a composition notebook. I randomly recorded the actions of particular students who frequently flock to this area during the given choice time. I also wrote down their dialogue as they played so that I could capture their conversations as they made connections from the book characters and brought them into their play. I also jot down if the students are using connections from the stories within their writing, book discussions and social talk between each other.

Research Journal

I used a research journal daily to write down my thoughts and findings that I observed during that day. I used this as a diary to document my feelings towards this study. I then used this journal to back up my research question. This journal allowed me to keep track of my daily progress or defeats during the study.

Owocki and Goodman (2002) explain that an educator must be an ongoing kidwatcher. Observing students during all aspects of their learning day invites the teacher into the world of the child. Each child has their own individual styles, backgrounds, and knowledge of the world. Kidwatching allows the teacher to know each learner for who they are in order to create meaningful learning experiences. Owocki and Goodman also discuss many areas of kidwatching and provide strategies and information to invite the teacher to use kidwatching in their classrooms. Kidwatchers learn a lot about a child's sociocultural awareness by watching them as they work and play. Owocki and Goodman also give details about the importance of children having opportunities to experience daily language and literacy practices. As a kidwatcher, the teacher creates learning environments where the classroom practices and activities connect with the children's personal and social world. Watching and listening while children play and communicate with each other in social situations is a powerful assessment tool. Owocki and Goodman explain that when teachers listen to children talk, interact with peers, and play, the more they see how the social situations help develop all aspects of language and thinking during reading and writing.

Class and Student Work/Teacher & Student Participation

The shared reading activity took place three times throughout the six weeks. The text was introduced and read as a read aloud. Most of the texts were new stories that the students had never heard before. The students used comparing and contrasting skills to record ideas about the characters they were recorded on chart paper. This allowed me to see if the students made meaningful connections of their prior knowledge of their own dramatic play to the characters. Finally, I invited the students to take their connections from the chart documentations to create a drawing and writing piece to further expresses their understanding and connections to their play and the text.

Data Analysis

This was a qualitative research study. I will triangulate my data by using the photos, survey from parents and kindergarten teacher interviews, students work and antidotal notes taken during their play experiences. I transcribe their dialogue by giving a thick description of the children's discussion with each other during dramatic play session, and my literacy based lessons that take place during this study. The survey given to parents has been analyzed and compared to each other. For the kindergarten teacher interviews I recorded their comments that they give me towards the questions I will be asking them.

Finally I gathered the information from my students work and observations of their play time experiences. Through conversations with them and their finished writing I can get a sense of the students thinking, process and creations of their

understanding. Bringing in all the characteristics of literacy I can see how my students make these connections through their writing and presenting their writing to their classmates during “Author’s Chair”. The goal is to have the children make rich connections between the characters in the texts presented and their own dramatic play experiences.

Criteria for Trustworthiness Section

I believe that this six week research period provided adequate time for me to collect significant observations of my students dramatic play activities and the students’ literacy related work. I drew on a variety of perspectives to develop the study’s findings. For example, I include in my analysis excerpts of students’ interaction with each other and with me. I transcribed the interviews of the kindergarten teachers verbatim, and used excerpts of the interviews to represent the teachers’ perceptions in chapter four. The parent surveys enabled me to gather the parents’ perceptions and make home school connections with my students’ play experiences outside of school.

Throughout this six week study, I engaged myself and the students in the purpose of this study. I was able to collect meaningful data and raise new and significant considerations to inform my understanding of the connections between dramatic play and literacy.

Limitations

This type of study had its disadvantages because the study was only done with a small group of participants. My population was only my class of 23 students. I did not use the other two first grade classes. It only took place within my classroom which represented only an urban population. It is also limited because I only worked on this project for six weeks and more time could be used to get a stronger show of literacy growth with the students. Surveys could have been administered to teachers throughout grade levels, not just K-1, to get their opinions and thoughts on the essential questions that the researcher is posing. This would have given me a wider range of participants which would invite me to analyze more participants, different grades (1-3), classroom environments and teachers.

More Space and Time for Play Experiences

This research study took place in my classroom. The participants were the 23 students in my class. The findings from this study can be used to help me better plan literacy based lessons that get my students interacting with each other and literature. Limitations of this were that I couldn't offer more play time for my students to explore the dress-up material. My daily schedule is packed full with instruction time that unfortunately play time gets put off until Friday afternoons. Space is also an issue. I would like to have my dramatic play center available and set up all the time. However, my classroom space is limited so I have to store the dramatic play center in large bins that are brought out during playtime.

Chapter Four: Results

I believe that dramatic play can be a meaningful, engaging way to invite young children to use their imaginations, transform into their favorite characters, and create their own stories and plays. When students are given the opportunity to use dramatic play, they are building on their prior knowledge, life experiences and relationships with their peers. When students are invited to dress up using various costumes, they can become anyone they want. Whether it is their favorite teacher, a family member or a fairy princess, dressing up is a social experience that involves the use of language and problem solving skills, and stimulates students to create their own stories and plays.

Through this qualitative study I investigated the connections my first grade students made between dramatic play and their literacy development. During this study, I explored the idea of using dramatic play to engage my emergent readers in a world of balanced literacy. I achieved this balance through, shared reading, read aloud, shared writing and independent writing activities. Using students' "free time," dress up play provided opportunities for them to make important connections between these significant literacy practices and the children's literature characters that we studied.

Research Question

How can dramatic play enhance the literacy development of first graders?

Children's Literature

During the research study, we explored five picture books through a unit theme-based plan. *Alice the Fairy* by David Shannon (2004), a story about a little girl who dresses up as a fairy and uses her strong imagination to create her own fairy world with her family members. *Fancy Nancy*, by Jane O'Conner and Robin Glasser (2005) is about a character who believes that more is always better when it comes to being fancy. *Ladybug Girl Dresses up* by David Soman and Jacky Davis (2008). Ladybug Girl is Lulu, a little girl who loves to dress in a ladybug costume. *Princess Grace* by Mary Hoffman, Cornelius Van Wright and illustrated by Ying Hwa Hu (2008) is the story of how two girls will be selected as princesses in the town parade, and Grace can't wait to be one of them. *Kapow* by George O'Connor (2007), is about a young boy realizes what it really means to be a superhero.

We explored each story for one week. I first created the unit plan by designing lesson plans for each story. I created follow-up activities for each story and invited time at the end of each week for the children to play with objects and clothes from the dress-up, prop boxes. At the beginning of each week, I read each story to the class as a whole group lesson. I posed essential questions for each story to help the students begin thinking about the ideas in each story.

Essential Questions

Alice the Fairy by David Shannon (2004); essential question: Do you think Alice knows the difference between real and pretend?

Fancy Nancy, by Jane O'Conner and Robin Glasser(2005); essential question: Why do you think Nancy likes to be fancy?

Ladybug Girl Dresses up by David Soman and Jacky Davis (2008); How does Lulu use her imagination?

Princess Grace by Mary Hoffman, Cornelius Van Wright and illustrated by Ying Hwa Hu (2008); essential question: How does Grace change her mind about the kind of Princess she wants to be in the school parade?

Kapow by George O'Connor (2007); essential question: What do the characters do to solve their problem while they are still playing pretend?

Week One: Alice the Fairy

I read *Alice the Fairy* (2004) first. This delightful tale about a four year old little girl who pretends she is a fairy engaged the class. I posed my essential question: Do you think Alice knows the difference between real and pretend? The students raised their hands anxiously to make their predictions. Most of the students explained, that no she didn't know the difference because she was too little to understand. David Shannon's funny illustrations kept them engaged. As I read, I focused on topic vocabulary that was popping up. I suspected that these were words that the students knew but had not seen written before or had really never focused on their meanings

before. As we came across them I wrote them onto sentence strips and we discussed their definitions. These words were “fairy”, “pretend”, “wand” and “dress-up”. I asked the students open-ended questions throughout the story to help them to begin thinking about this kind of play such as “Why do you think Alice thinks she is a fairy?” “Have you ever wanted to pretend you were a fairy?” Once I finished reading the story I present a Venn diagram to the students. . The students and I then compared Alice’s character to their own dress up play. This activity was done as a whole group. I wrote their responses in the diagram and we discussed where each answer should go.

The following day, I brought out the Venn diagram. As we revisited it, we discussed the book, looked at the pictures and refreshed our memories about the story. The students asked me to read the story to them again, which I did.

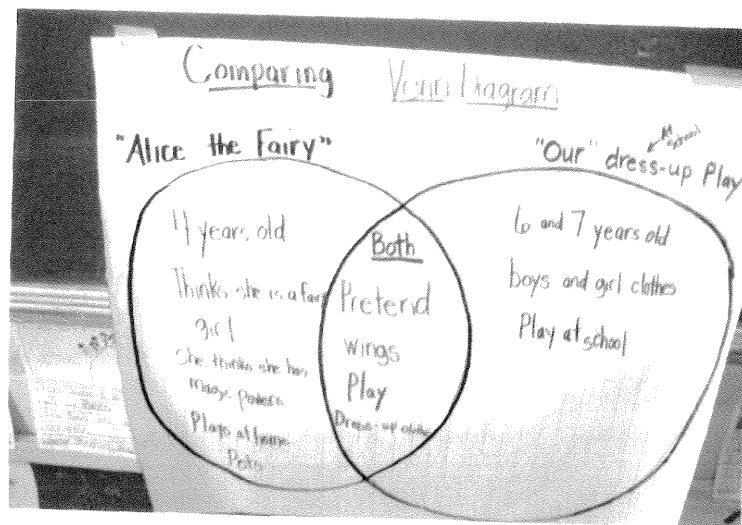


Figure 4.1: Venn diagram comparing *Alice the Fairy* & Students own dress up play

After the second reading, I started a shared writing lesson about *Alice the Fairy* by explaining that we would write about how Alice played dress-up and how we played dress up. I started off the shared writing piece by writing the sentence; “Alice and I play dress-up.” Next, I invited the students to create another sentence that could follow my first sentence. I guided them towards the Venn diagram to help them remember our ideas from the previous day. They generated many sentences for me to write. Some examples of the student generated sentences were; Alice has fairy wings and I have fairy wings. Alice pretends and so do I.

Once we were finished, I explained to the students that it was now their turn to write about Alice and themselves. I gave each child a piece of primary writing paper. During this time the students returned to their seats. They already knew the writing expectations in our classroom. They got out their materials and went to work. I turned on some quiet music and the students began writing and drawing their responses.

The Venn diagram and vocabulary words remained up however, I took down the shared writing piece as I didn’t want them to just copy my work. I wanted them to use their ideas and thought for their own work. While they were writing, I made my way around the room conferencing and giving assistance to the students. This writing assignment took place during two writing blocks, which were 30 minutes apiece. After the students were done, I invited them to present their work at “Authors Chair.”

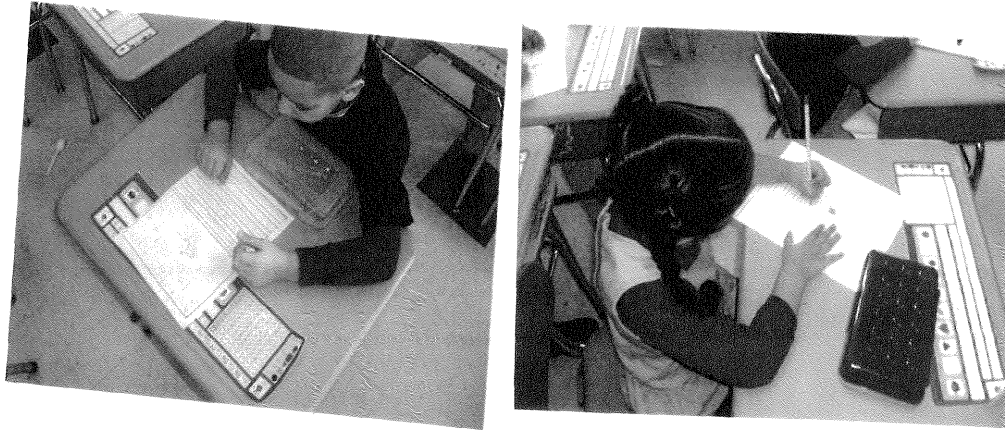


Figure 4.2: Students writing their comparison piece to *Alice the Fairy*

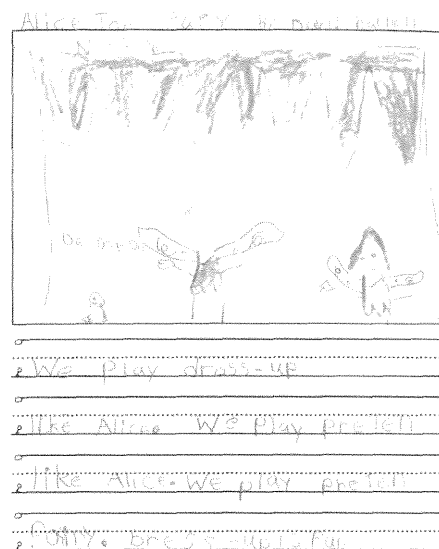


Figure 4.3: Final writing piece for comparing *Alice the Fairy* and student

At the end of the week, I brought out the dress-up bins.. I had added some props similar to those in the story such as, fairy wings, and wands. I observed that the students started acting out the book. Some of the girls were Alice, others were her mother or father. They were pretending to do the same things Alice did in the story and were using some of the language from the book within their dialogue. For example,

Natalia: I'm Alice, I'm the fairy a real pretend fairy who's going to be my mom?

Jonae: I'm the mom and I wanna make you eat broccoli.

Qua'mell: Can I be the Dad? I wanna be the Dad.

Gabriella: Here Natalia, here's a wand you need the wand.

Jonae: We can pretend that the bin is the bathtub full of jello like in the book.

After the students set the stage for the book, they created their own little fairy playtime. It exploded into boys being fairies and chasing the girls and the girls using the wands to make the boys go away. However, the concept of Alice's pretend world was always within their play.

Week Two: Princess Grace

Week two offered another story about dressing up. However, *Princess Grace* (2008) changed the structure of the students' thinking about what is real and what is fantasy. As I introduced the story *Princess Grace* (2008) I invited the students to share what they thought a princess really was. Many of their responses were what I expected: Cinderella to the Princess and the Frog movie is what the students believed to be real princess. Some of the boys discussed that this story was only for girls and they were not ready to listen to another story about a princess. I redirected them by asking them to make predictions about what the character Grace might do in the story. I also invited the boys to see if there were any boys in the story. I asked them to make predictions about what they thought the boys were doing in this story. I then posed the

essential question; How does Grace change her mind about the kind of Princess she wants to be in the school parade?

I shared the pictures as we went through a whole group picture walk. Once they saw the pictures, the boys started to change their idea of what this story might be about. I asked them if they knew what “royalty” and fantasy meant. Most of the children responded with answers such as; “It’s a king and queen or a princess” “fantasy is pretend”. After we discussed these words I placed them onto our dress up word wall.

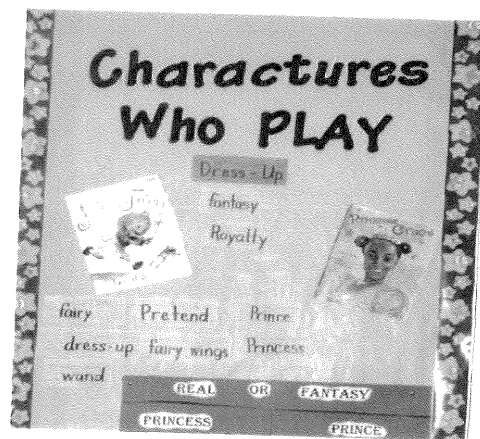


Figure 4.4: Our Dramatic play Word Wall

After I read the story, the students asked many questions. They wanted to know if the royalty in the story was real. Also, the boys wanted to know if there are real princes in the world now. This was great conversation that brought us into our follow-up activity. I created a graphic organizer that was labeled “Real or Fantasy.” Then I divided the organizer into two sections, one for princess and one for princes. I had pictures of famous fairy tale royalty and real royalty. As a class we then sorted the pictures into the right categories. I showed the students images of real royalty who are alive today, such as the Princes of Wales, Queen Elizabeth, and the Prince of Morocco.

The students were excited to see that there is real royalty around our world today. The boys were excited to see pictures of the Princes of Wales. The girls were just as excited about seeing photos of a real queen who are alive today also.

Whole Group Picture Sort



Figure 4.5: Finished Poster of Our Whole Group Picture Sort; Real Royalty and Fantasy

The next day I read the story *Princess Grace* (2008) again. This time I asked the students to retell the story before I read it. Many students were eager to share the text with the class. They liked the part when Grace and her friends researched real princes. The boys were eager to share that they remembered how the boys in the story got to dress-up as princes at the parade. Many students made connections to their own experiences of watching fantasy princess movies and relating themselves to Grace. Others students were excited that Grace was not dressed as a fairy princess in the end but as a real African Princess.

After reading the story again and revisiting the graphic organizer we did the day before, I invited the students to do their own picture independently. Similar to the whole group sort I provided them with eight photos of real royalty and pretend royalty. I also provided them with a sorting mat to glue the pictures onto the right section of the organizer. At the top of the graphic organizer I posed a question; “Are they real or pretend?” The students worked on this activity at their seats. I observed them to be highly engaged and eager to show me that they understood the difference between real and fantasy. I quietly walked around the classroom and conferenced with them as they completed their graphic organizer. I was happy to hear them using story vocabulary and making connections from the story to this activity.

Heather: Oscar, I like how you are sorting the people into the right sections.

Which side is your Favorite? Real Royalty or Pretend Royalty?

Oscar: Look Mrs. Martens, I like this Prince, he’s real I want to play him like the boys in the story did.

Heather: Why do you want to be like the real Prince and not like the Princes you see in the movies.

Oscar: Because they are real and I know that they are real. Remember, the Prince you showed us on that poster and in the Grace book? I’m pretending I am them!

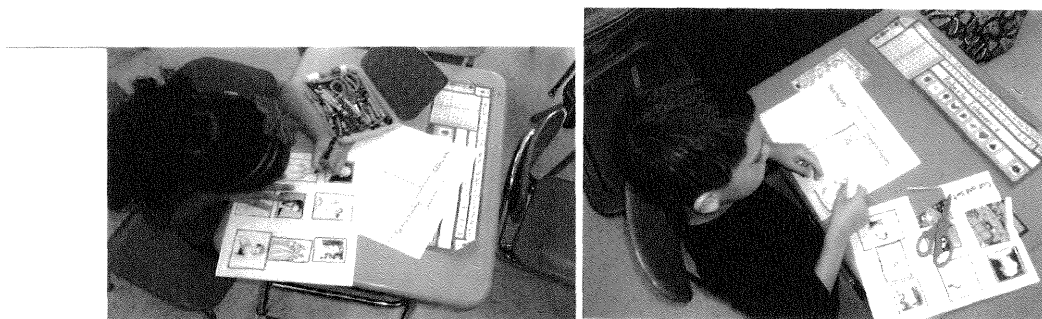


Figure 4.6: Students' Royalty Picture Sort

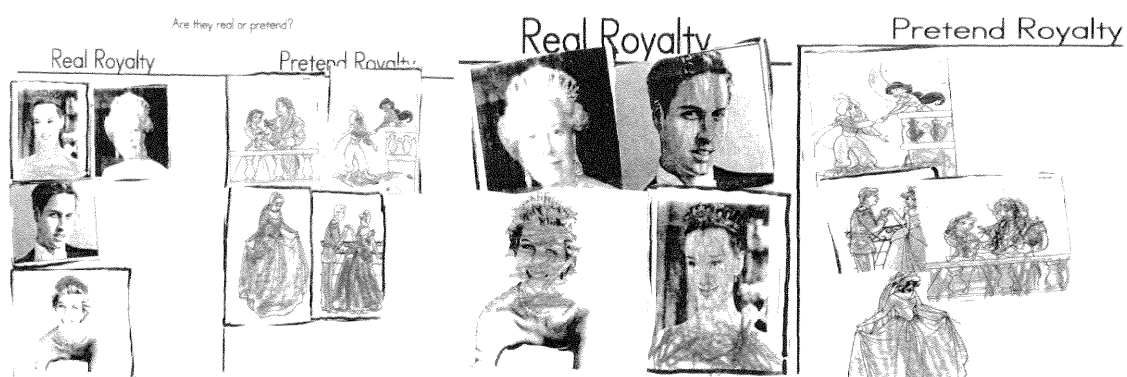


Figure 4.7: Students' Color/Cut and Pasted Photographs of Real Royalty and Pretend Royalty

Week Three: KAPOW

For the next book, I chose the graphic, *KAPOW* graphic novel by George O'Connor (2007). As I discussed the story with the students, the boys became tremendously excited. They noticed the little boy on the front cover dressed like a superhero and it became the staple of the read aloud. The idea of a book about a character dressing up as a superhero was new and exciting for them. During the book

introduction I asked the students about the text of the story. I held up another story book with conventional paragraphs next to *KAPOW (2007)*. I asked the students to notice what was different about the two. Many raised their hands in excitement. They noticed that the words were written differently on the page. One student shouted out, “Those are speech bubbles like in comic books! I have a comic book at home.”

Excited response was generated by all the students engaging comments about the story. I discussed with the students that yes, these are called speech bubbles. Authors use speech bubbles to write dialogue. Dialogues are the words that the characters speak. I demonstrated and also wrote the word dialogue on a sentence strip. I placed it onto our dress-up word wall. Just before reading the text, I posed the essential question; What do the characters do to solve their problem while they are still playing pretend?

During the read aloud the students had many comments about the context of the story. First the story started out with a superhero on a big mission to save someone. He had a sidekick who is a girl and they are on an adventure until I turned the page and the two characters are just regular kids like them. Their reactions were loud and engaging:

Student: Hey, they are playing in their house.

Heather: Yes, they are. What do you think they are playing?

Student: Pretend, dress up like we do, but they are in their house.

Heather: That’s right, let’s see what ways they use their imaginations to play pretend in their house.

I continue reading and the characters go on an adventure of capturing a villain. The villain is played by the young boy's brother. Next, they are after a big panther. I pose a question to the students; "Do you think there is a real panther in the house? What could they pretend to use as a panther?" Many students raised their hands and want to share their predictions. Most of the students said they thought their cat was the pretend wild animal. As I turned the page they cheered with excitement. They saw that it was the cat that was used as the pretend vicious panther. During this time of the read aloud, another student raised his hand with excitement. He needed to share something. Calling his name he shouts out, "I have a text to text connection! There is a cat in the Princess Grace book too. Remember she played with her cat too, she put a cape on and pretended it was a prince." Once he exclaimed his connection, I got out Princess Grace and let him find the page. He showed the class his connection. After that every time we discussed *KAPOW* (2007) or *Princess Grace* (2008), at least one or two children had to mention that connection.

After reading the story, I invited the students to help me make a list of all the superheroes on a large sheet of chart paper. The students were highly engaged with this activity and the paper was filled with fictional superheroes in no time. They gave me examples such as; Spiderman, Superman, Batman, Cat Woman, The Hulk, The Fantastic 4.

The following day, I read the story again, this time I asked the students to retell as much of the story as they could before I read it. They had no problems doing this. After I read the story again, I posed the question; "So how would you play superheroes? What would you wear or need to play like the characters in *KAPOW*?"

Heather: Friends could you dress up or look like a Superhero?

Robert: You can wear a Spiderman costume.

Qua'mell: I have a Batman costume and my brother has Robin. Can
we bring them in?

Heather: Of course you can.

Tony: Capes superheroes have capes the kids in the book wore capes
too.

Heather: How could you make a cape if you didn't have a real costume
at home or here at school?

Once I posed this question to the students the ideas began to spill out of them. Many said to go out and buy a real superhero costume. Some students suggested making a costume but were not sure how to do it. This is when I brought out my old bag of fabric. I pulled out the heap of multi-colored, mismatched yards of fabric and placed it on the floor in the middle of our circle. Then without saying anything I took a piece and tied it around my neck to make a cape. As soon as I did this all the students wanted one, too. I had enough for almost every child to have a cape. When the fabric was all gone and there were three students without capes who had the look of disappointment in their eyes. The looks of disappointment did last long as I brought out the rest of the dress-up clothes and showed them how to make a cape out of a large men's dress shirt. Once we all had a cape, I invited the students to pretend they were superheroes.

Because there were 23 students and a lot of furniture in the classroom, I put them into groups of four and five for this activity. Then I gave each group time to go around the classroom as superheroes while the other groups waited their turn. This activity was a hit! After each group had a chance we collected the new capes and placed them into the dress-up bins. I explained that they would be in the bins and that during play time they could play with them.

When “play time” came the students were eager to get the dress-up bins out. As they rummaged through the bins, the capes we had made earlier in the week quickly were put on. The boys began acting out different superheroes.

Heather: What Superhero are you today?

Tony: I’m Superman and I’m on top of a building.

Jenna: Hey let’s go get the witch.

One boy is dressed in a witch costume. He is acting as the villain. The girls also join in and wear the princess outfits and capes. One girl puts on the fairy wings and a cape. She announces that she is also a superhero like the girl in KAPOW.

Natalie: I’m the girl superhero like in the book. I wanna get the witch too.

Tony: I am Superman! Let’s go get that witch, hurry!

Jenna: Quick get your cape and let’s go, she is getting away!

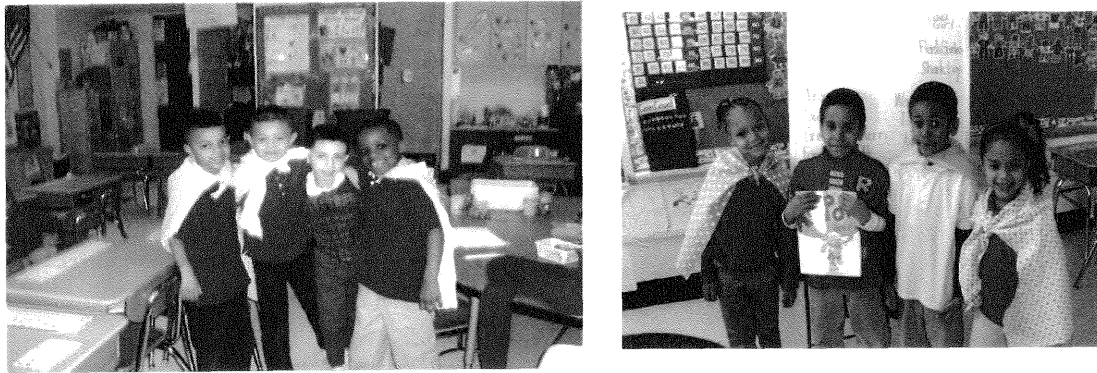


Figure 4.8: Students Wearing the Capes Made After Reading *KAPOW*

They all pretend to fly around the room. They huddle together and called themselves a team. The boys and girls play together during this playtime, which did not usually happen. More often the girls played together and the boys played together. Very seldom do the two genders mix, until now.

Week Four: Fancy Nancy

This week I introduced the story *Fancy Nancy* by Jane O'Connor (2005). The students were already very familiar with the *Fancy Nancy* (2005) series. To start out the conversation I posed the essential question; Why do you think Nancy likes to be fancy? They regularly check these books out of our school library. Since I knew they already knew a lot about this character, I had the students help me list what we already knew about the character. We made a list of characteristics that they already knew about Nancy. They brought prior knowledge of this character to the discussion. Many girls already knew that the character “Nancy” loved to dress in fancy clothes. They also

discussed how they enjoy taking *Fancy Nancy (2005)* books out of the library. Some of the girls exclaimed that they had the book series at their home. Then I introduced and new word to be placed onto our word wall “Fancy” and asked the students what the word meant. Their responses included looks nice, pretty and wearing pretty clothes.

I explained that this word would appear many times throughout the story. The author used it to give the sentences “juicy” details. As we finished our list and discussion of the vocabulary word, I started reading the book. The students enjoyed the silliness of Nancy’s situations that she got herself in. They also enjoyed that the family in the story dressed up with her.

For the extension of this lesson, I had the students use descriptive word choices in their response to literature to *Fancy Nancy (2005)*. Once again I gave the students primary writing paper. Before they began writing, we made a list of “juicy” word choice words. I posed a question to the students; “What words could you use to describe Nancy and her adventures in this story?” I left the list up for the students to use as part of their environmental print during independent writing time. The students worked on this writing piece for two writing block times, which were about 30 minutes at a time throughout two days. Once the students finished their work, I invited them to an “Authors Chair” session so that they could share their work with their classmates. This also took two days because of time restraints and allowing every child to share his or her work.

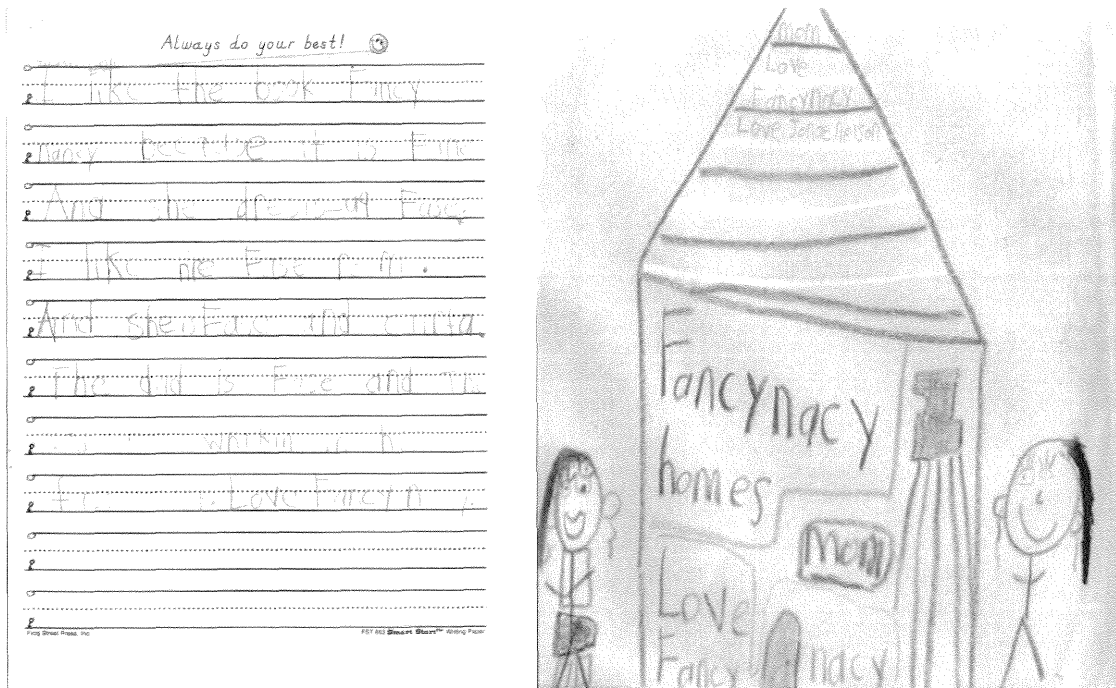


Figure 4.9: A Student's Finished Writing Piece for *Fancy Nancy*

During this week's playtime, I added feathery boas, men's dress shirts and crowns to the dress up box. As in the weeks prior, the students continued to bring the books to life within their pretend play. I observed them mixing superheroes into Fancy Nancy's world and bringing in little bits of *Alice the Fairy* (2004) into the storylines as well. I also observed that students who normally would not play with the dress up clothes experiencing the dress up box for the first time. As it is in every play time experience in my classroom, the clothes and props were all over the floor. Students change and as quick as they got on their outfits, their imaginations were soaring with characters not only from the texts that we are reading in class but television and movie characters and also many made up characters as well. They were creating their own characters and mixing them within the texts that we had read. The boys were becoming more involved in the pretend play by becoming the father's in each story. The students

were acting out the stories and mixing them together. Alice was within Fancy Nancy's world and Nancy was traveling into Alice's' silly fairy land. It was wonderful to see the students' excitement and imaginations soar throughout their play.

Week Five: Lady Bug Girl

For the last book in the unit, I chose *Lady Bug Girl* by Davis Soman and Jacky Davis (2008). This was a story with which the students were not familiar. As I gave the book introduction about "Lulu" the main character I presented the essential question; How does Lulu use her imagination? I then asked the students about how this character was similar to the other characters we had been exploring in this unit. They didn't waste any time making connections between each of other the books characters and storylines; connecting dress-up play, pretend play and superheroes. Each story had a connection to one another and the students knew this. Some of their connections were that all the characters had a pet wither a cat or a dog. They all connected each character to their interests in playing pretend and dressing up. They were eager to hear Lady Bug Girl. When this story was over the students expressed what they liked about it and then we discussed all the similarities between all the books. We charted our responses on chart paper and we left the list up for further use in the final activity. As a follow up activity I invited the students to create a poster that compared two characters from the unit. I asked them to label and try to put captions.



Figure 4.10: Character Comparison Poster

During their playtime, the students continued pretending to be the characters from the stories while also bringing in the new character “Lulu” and even her dog “Bingo.” I captured dialogue from two students who were recreating a scene from Lady Bug Girl. One student had on a fluffy skirt and wings while the other was on their hands and knees pretending to be “Lulu” and her dog “Bingo”.

Kayla: Ok I’m Lulu and you are my dog ok?

Jenna: The dog is like her sidekick, remember his name is Bingo.

Kayla: Yup, come on let’s go pretend the bins are like the fort that she makes in the book.

Jenna: [Barks and trots on his hands and knees over to one of the bins]

Kayla: Bingo, you have to copy me like he does in the story

Jenna: Oh yeah, but I don’t talk I just bark.

I observe the two students play this for about five minutes then the scene gets invited by other children and they end up creating their own made up world built off of all the characters they are acting out.

Week Six: Collimating Activity

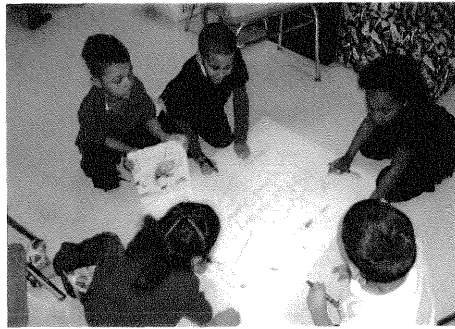
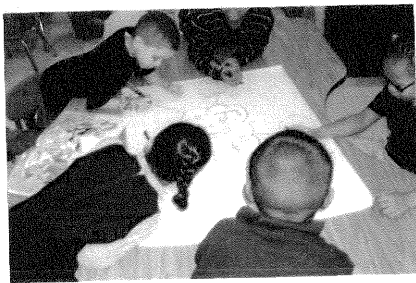
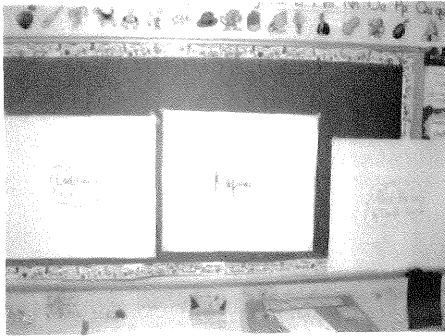
To bring this unit to a close I wanted to bring all five books and the various characters to the stage. I wanted to engage the students in an activity that they had never done before on their own. On a piece of large chart paper, I set up a topic web for each story. The graphic organizers were to be filled out by the students in small groups. I posted the five sheets of paper up in front of the room. Then as a group we discussed all of the books again. I modeled making a topic web for one of the books. I asked the students to tell me main ideas about the book. As they shared their thoughts I added them to the web. After we were done creating the web, I explained that it was now their turn to create a web for their book of choice. I divided the students up into five groups. There were four or five students per group. I invited them to choose their favorite book from the unit.

Once the groups chose their book, they used markers to record their main ideas of the story. I also provided the book to each group so that they could pick out key concepts and vocabulary. I explained that each group had to work together to create their web, spelling was not an issue and that I wanted them to think about their story and really pull out the important details. The groups were spread out around the classroom.

One group was on the reading table while the other groups found areas on the floor to write. Each child got a marker and a spot on the paper to write. While they were working, I connected with each group several times. I had to keep some students on track and focused on the task. I was surprised to see the students engaged in such an independent group writing activity. I observed them using vocabulary from the text and sounding out the words as they wrote. I also observed them helping each other and working together to build on each other's ideas. This was a powerful activity and their engagement showed that this was a meaningful activity to them.

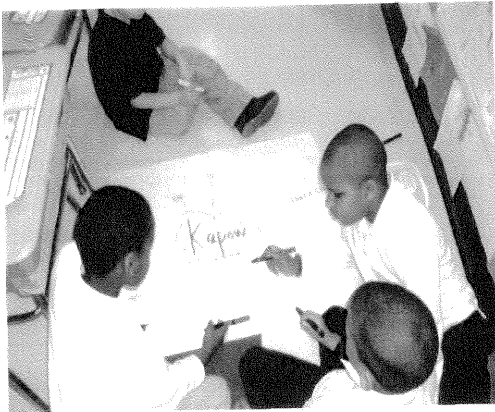
When I noticed that the students had filled their webs and each student in the group had contributed I brought the class back together for a share out time. I collected the posters and had the students sit together on the carpet area. I chose one group at a time to come up to the front of the class and share. Since they had never done this before I modeled how to share the information on their web. Once the groups knew what they had to do they began sharing out results.

Each group demonstrated great use of oral language skills as they shared information from their graphic organizer. The students not presenting stayed engaged and focused on their peers who were presenting. After each group was done, the students cheered and clapped for them. As each group finished presenting, I posted their poster up on the chalkboard. At the end of the sharing time all five graphic organizers hung in front of the room on the board. The students were very proud of their work.



Fancy Nancy

Alice the Fairy



KAPOW

Princess Grace

Figure 4.11: Student Independent Group Work: Creating a Topic Web

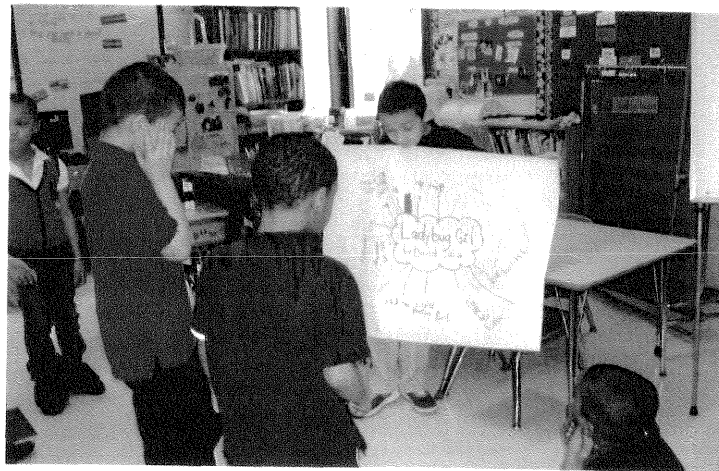
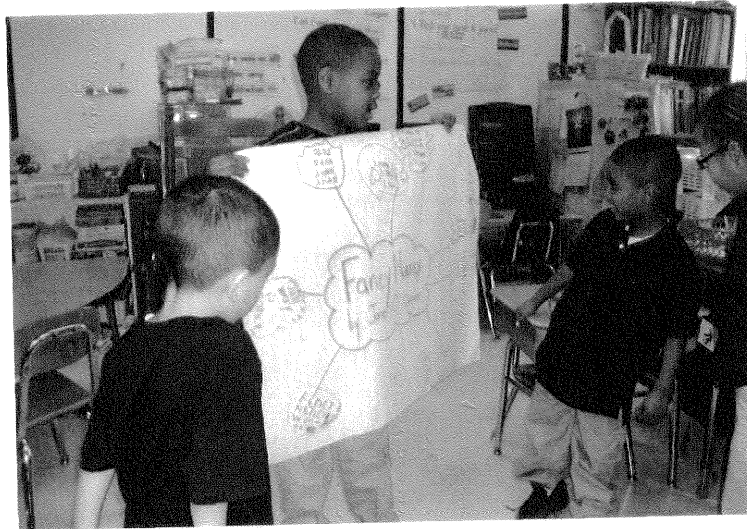


Figure 4.12: Students Sharing Time: Presenting Their Topic Web to the Class

Final Writing Lesson

Once the graphic organizers were completed and posted onto the chalkboard the next task was to invite the students to choose their favorite book from the unit. First I gave out drawing paper to each student. After asking them to choose their favorite story I invited them to draw that character or scene from the story that they liked the best. This would be the illustration that would go with their writing piece.

Once the pictures were completed the students were handed out primary writing paper. This time without a picture box on the paper, I wanted them to just write about why they enjoyed the book so much and not focus on the drawing which was already completed. This writing lesson was done in a writer's workshop form. The students already knew the expectations for writer's workshop time. I invited some students to work on the floor or carpet area using clipboards. Some chose to stay at their desks while others wanted to write at tables around the room. Once they were situated, I turned on quiet classical music and a quiet calm came over the room.

As the students worked on their pieces I made my way around to every child, I had writing conferences with them by discussing their book choice, word choices they were using and any other questions they had. I stressed to them that this writing was more than just getting the spelling right. It was about getting their voice onto the page and expressing their feelings towards their book of choice. This writing task was worked on for two days during our writing block which is 30 minutes apiece.

After students started finishing I invited them to have pair share time with other students who had finished. Some gathered on the carpet while others took advantage of the reading couch. This pair share time was important for the students to

build their oral language with each other and invited their peers to help give them feedback about their writing pieces.

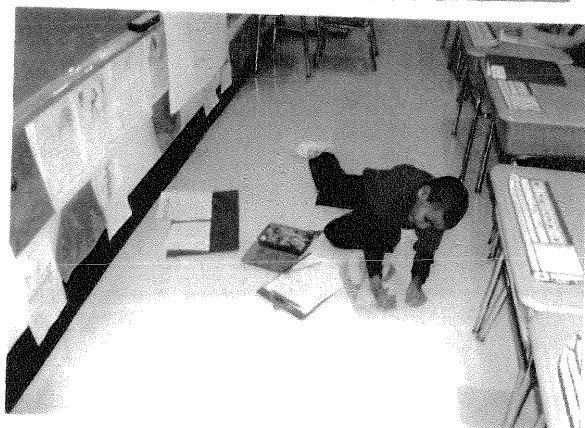
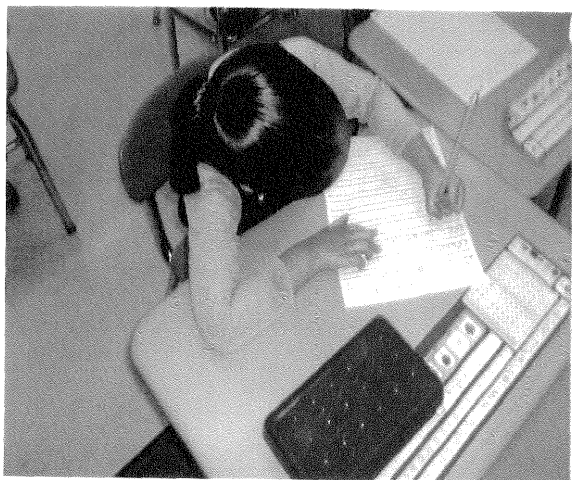


Figure 4.13: Writer's Workshop

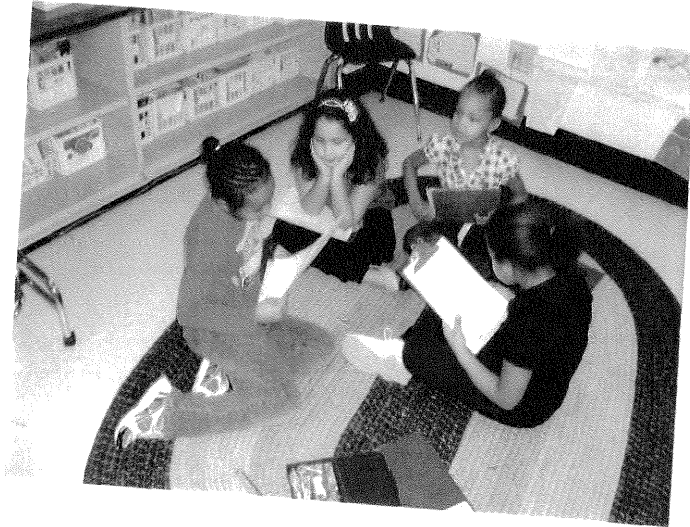


Figure 4.14: Peer Sharing

Final Work: Author's Chair

For a final sharing time, I gathered the students to the carpet area to share their writing and drawings of their book choice. They eagerly brought their illustrations and writing to the carpet. Each child was offered a chance to share. I invited them to sit in my chair and read their work. The students listened to each other as they shared their work. I stood next to them for guidance with reading the words they wrote. The students read their pieces and then showed their illustrations. Students applauded when their sharing was done. Then I invited the students to ask the reader questions and give comments about their writing and illustrations. This offered more chances for oral language between the students.

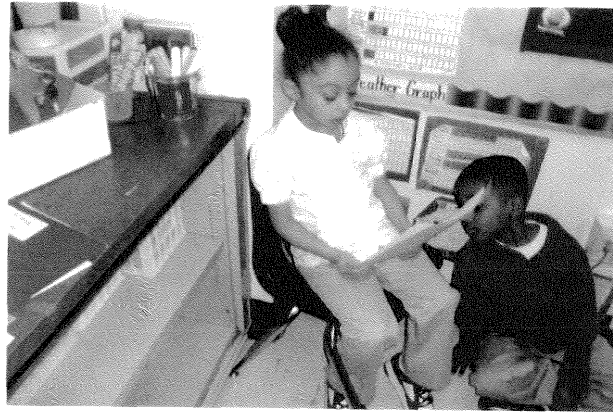
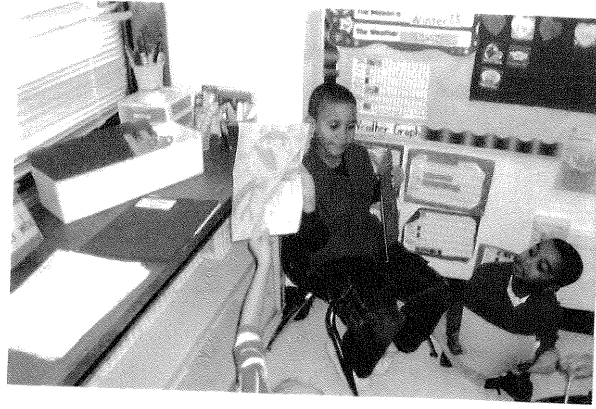


Figure 4.15: Author's Chair: Students Sharing Their Writing with the Class

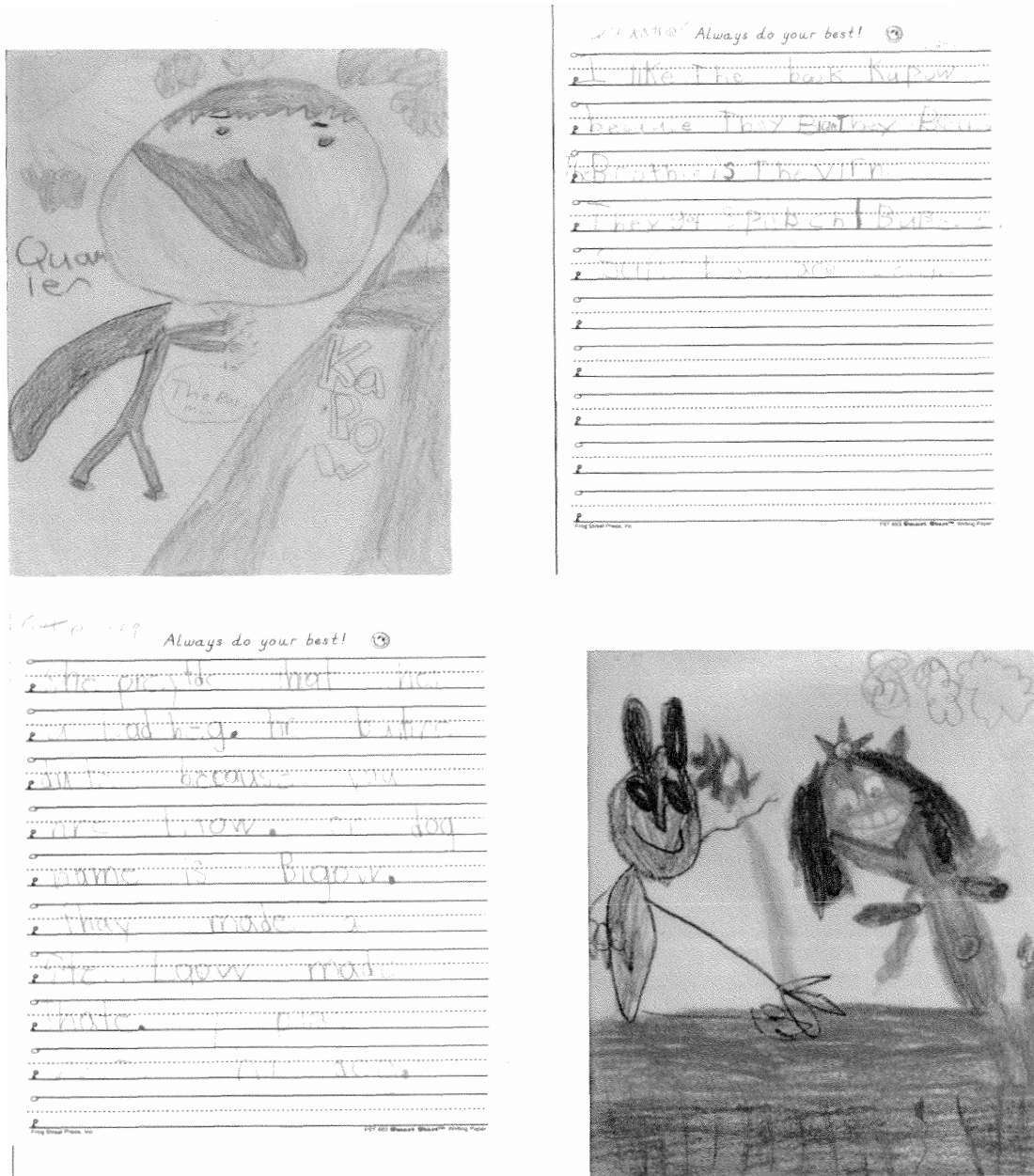


Figure 4.16: Students' Writing and Illustrations of Their Final Response of this Unit

Parents Survey

To get insight into my students' thoughts and ideas about dress-up play, I sent home a simple questionnaire to their families about their involvement with pretend dress-up play at home. This parent survey went home two weeks before I started the study. I sent it home in their take home folders that go back and forth from school to home every day.

Questions Asked to Classroom Families

1. Does your child play dress up at home? Yes or No
2. Does your child play alone or with others while at home? Yes or No
3. Does your child like to act out characters from movies? Yes or No
4. Does your child enjoy dressing up? Yes or No

Out of 23 students in my class, I received back 12 completed questionnaires out of 23 surveys sent home this was a 52 percent return rate. Within the 12 responses, nine families answered "Yes" to all four questions asked. The other three families said "No" that their child does not play dress up. However they did circle "Yes" for the other three of the questions. I think many parents rushed through this survey without really thinking about the questions. This is because from passed experiences with parent communication I have found that many of my classroom families do not spend a lot of time going over school work or school related information. I know that most of my students particularly the boys' sit and play video games when they are at home. This is because they comment on how much they play at home and what games they are playing on a nightly and weekend basis.

Also, their parents have mentioned to me that they enjoy playing their video games and how often they play them.

The surveys were anonymous. I did not put the student's or parent's names on the surveys before sending them home. However, a couple parents put their child's name on the survey so I did know what child they were talking about. The mother of twin boys that I have in my class did put their names on it. She explained how they boys like to play dress up in superhero outfits and old Halloween costumes.

Knowing that I do not get a lot of parent support from my families was at times discouraging. The parents who responded were the parents who I knew would respond. They were the only parents who contribute to the class and had good contact with me. As an educator in a low income district it tends to come as no surprise that parent involvement is low. As a teacher I provide a meaningful, nurturing classroom community. I want the students to feel safe, important and happy within their learning environment. If they don't have that level of comfort and support then I feel teaching is much harder to accomplish.

Kindergarten Teacher Interview Questions and Responses

The purpose of this study was to observe the connections between dramatic play and literacy connections within my first grade classroom. I also was curious to find out how the kindergarten teachers in our school felt about incorporating dramatic play with literacy activities within their classrooms daily practice and how they went about doing so.

Interview Questions

1. How often do you invite your students to play dress up?
2. Do you encourage both boys and girls to play dress up?
3. Do you feel that dramatic play is an important part of an early childhood curriculum?
4. Have you ever used your dramatic play area to enhance a literacy lesson? If so what was the lesson like?

The two teachers I chose to interview are my colleagues. I conducted the interviews in their classrooms after school hours. I have had the opportunity to work closely with both these teachers two years ago. I co-taught with Mary in her kindergarten room. We had 30 kindergartners within our classroom. I then took 19 of these students to first grade the following year. This experience allowed me to develop a deeper understanding about the powerful learning experiences that take place in kindergarten. I learned so much from Mary who is a seasoned teacher. She brought her experiences to the daily practices of our classroom. She also embraced new teaching styles in which I brought to my new role as co-teacher.

The two kindergarten rooms are located in their own wing of our building. These rooms are very large. They are double the size of my classroom and have large windows on one wall. Their learning/play centers are placed in appropriate areas around the room. They have a block area, computer center, and a housekeeping/dramatic play area. They also have shelves with various puzzles and age appropriate games available for the students to play. Each room offers a reading/book area. Here the students are invited to quietly read and look at books. The students sit at tables with six students to a table. There is a guided reading table

and a listening center in each room. Both teachers' offers a comfortable carpet space where read alouds, and calendar activities take place.

Conversations with Kindergarten Teachers

Mary who has taught for 25 years invites her students to choose the "House" center every day at playtime. In this center, I have dresses, purses, jewelry and hats for the children to wear. She see's boys choosing dress up just as much as the girls. Kathy who has taught for 12 years invites her students to play dress up four to five times per week during developmental center time in our day. She also invites her students to wear fancy clothes such as shoes, child size dresses, costumes and hats.

Both teachers made a point of saying that, dramatic play is very important in an early childhood curriculum it allows children to role play and use their imaginations. Kathy and Mary both explained that there are many times where they incorporate the dramatic play area with literacy activities. Mary explained when the weather changes, she usually reads a picture book that discusses what clothing to wear for which season. She constructs a clothes line within the classroom and clothes pins up different clothes for each season. Then after reading the book she invites the students to try on clothes for the seasons that she calls out. Mary stated, "This builds classification skills and incorporates our science curriculum to into the lessons." Mary also explained that she does not discourage boys from playing in the dramatic play center. She feels that all the students should feel they can dress in what they want to and explore all aspects of the center.

Kathy explained that she encourages all her students of either gender to play dress up. She offers students a variety of dress up clothes and accessories to choose from regardless of gender. Kathy stated, “Dramatic play is definitely important part of my early childhood curriculum. Young children need ample opportunities to express themselves and their imaginations through play.” Kathy also explained that she uses the dramatic play area to enhance literacy lessons. For example, during fire prevention week she does a fire safety lesson. She places fire safety related items such as helmets and coats in the play area. Students then are given the opportunity to engage in play experiences. They get to try on the fire clothing and enjoy acting out firefighters. Kathy also explained that she reads numerous picture books related to fire safety. She invites her students to make connections and ask questions about fire safety.

These two teachers demonstrate how they create wonderful opportunities to engage their students in dramatic play and literacy activities that engage their early literacy learners into the world of both pretend play and emergent literacy. The experiences that they provide give their students a strong foundation that can be carried into their first grade year. They also help to continue to answer my research question, How can dramatic play enhance the literacy development of first graders? The paragraph above is a little wider than the others.

Collaborating with these teachers is an important way for me to build meaningful daily practices and continued literacy learning throughout their primary learning years. The first grade team works closely with the kindergarten team to ensure that the students are getting the learning support and strategies they need to

become successful learners within the early stages of their education. We work together building a strong foundation that flows throughout the students early childhood experiences. I feel that this build a strong foundation for their future learning experiences.

Conclusion

This study was a successful learning experience for both me and my students. There were so many meaningful ways in which the students connected dramatic play into their literacy lessons. It invited them to explore new story book characters and act out their favorite ones through their play. The students took ownership of their writing assignments and made connections between the texts and their play experiences. References from the books are still being reenacted within their dramatic playtimes. Connection from the stories are being made new ones are still being brought up as this school year rolls on. They continue to reread the stories from the study and have taken them out of the school library for their reading pleasure. I believe that play should be such an important part of an early childhood classroom. The activities and experiences that the students took part in where developmentally appropriate. I plan to continue incorporating dramatic play into my classroom structure.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

I recognize that dramatic play is a meaningful, engaging way to invite students to use their imaginations, transform into their favorite characters, and create their own stories and plays. When students are given the opportunity to dramatize, they build on their funds of knowledge. Rowe (2007) explained that in dramatic play, children pretend as if real-world objects and people have other identities. She also states that effective book related play is a way to make connections between the student's pretend play, real life scenarios and the literature they read. When students are invited to dress up using various costumes, they can become anyone they want. Whether it is their favorite teacher, a family member or a fairy princess, dressing up is a social experience that involves the use of language and problem solving skills, and stimulates student's to create their own contexts, stories and plays.

Throughout this qualitative study I created meaningful literacy lessons and activities that generated my students' use of oral language development, enhanced their dramatic play experiences, facilitated their writing pieces and enabled them to make positive connections between the characters within the various texts. The purpose of this study was to observe the connections between dramatic play and literacy within my classroom. I invited my students to create meaningful dramatic play by inviting them to play with the dress up clothes and props during designated play times throughout our school day. I recognize that students can use play as a resource through which to discover their developing conceptions about and use of literacy skills. Literacy and play can emerge in relationship when a teacher invites her students to explore both worlds together. The students learn to comprehend the

interactions between the two. Through this study, I have uncovered many connections between dramatic play and literacy.

Conclusions

Play Enabled Students to Generate Text-to-Text Connections

It was evident that the students made meaningful connections between the characters within the stories and their own play. They made text to text connections by noticing similarities within the books. For example, a student pointed out that in the stories *Alice the Fairy* (2004) and *Princess Grace* (2008), both characters had cats that took part in their pretend play. Another student connected *Lady Bug Girl* (2008) to *Kapow* (2007) because both characters pretended to be superheroes during their play. They acted out the books characters in their dramatic play experiences, created stories and compared the story characters together, created illustrations of themselves and the characters that played dress-up in the texts. The students brought these connections out into their play experiences as well as when they were writing about the characters.

Play Stimulated Students' Reading and Writing Skills

The students engaged in meaningful literacy activities that stimulated their reading and writing skills. During "Author's Chair" sessions, the students practiced their reading and oral language skills by reading aloud their writing pieces as well as giving explanations about their illustrations. During this study the students also used graphic organizers to collect facts about the stories. I observed this in a small group activity. The students shared their story webs with the class.

Play Created Opportunities for Students to Read and Write about the Characters and Themselves

During this study I offered the students many opportunities to read and write about the characters in the stories. They wrote about their favorite characters and expressed why they liked those characters. With their peers they created large story webs about the books to get a better understanding about the context of the stories and the characters personalities. The students shared their work with each other during “peer reading” and “author’s chair” settings. The students also reread the stories that were a part of this study. They read them to themselves and to each other. Combined these opportunities and experiences enable students to read and write in ways that were motivating and purposeful to them.

Dramatic Play Brought Characters to Life

During the entire study I offered many opportunities for the children to engage with the dramatic play prop box. The clothes represented many of the costumes worn by the characters we were studying. I created the same opportunities for the book *Kapow* (2007) the students and I made superhero capes out of material. These capes were used to reenact the story during the students’ playtime. Dramatic play occurs when children adopt roles and use make-believe to act out stories. My students brought these characters to life within their play. They also created new characters that were authentic to their play as the characters in the stories. Using fairy wings, tutu’s, capes, dresses, plastic wands and crowns the students created their own fantasy world during their dramatic play. Many of my unenthusiastic readers were highly

engaged for both the literacy activities and the dramatic play experiences that were provided during this study. Interacting with dramatic play invites these reluctant readers to engage in language rich activities.

Listening and Speaking During Play Help Students Develop Oral Language Skills

During this study I invited my students to express themselves orally. I introduced them to new vocabulary such as; *fantasy*, and *royalty*. They then implanted them into their writing pieces and illustrations. I invited open conversations about the characters. They discussed what they liked and disliked about the characters. They also had whole group and peer discussions about the stories. During their dramatic play they acted out the characters and created dialogue.

The students had to engage in a great deal of listening during this study. They listened to read alouds of the stories, listened to their peers read their work and listen to each other during their play. This was an important part of their learning development.

The Use of Graphic Organizers and Illustrations Supported Students' Use of Higher Order Thinking Skills

The students used many ways to compare the characters. Using Venn diagrams, picture sorts, and story webs the students and I compared many aspects of these stories. After reading *Alice the Fairy* (2004), we used a Venn diagram to compare the students pretend play to the character Alice's pretend play. I used picture sorts while reading *Princess Grace* (2008). The students sorted photos of real and pretend royalty to get a deeper understanding for the concept real and fantasy. For the story *KAPOW* (2007), the students and I compared superhero characters to the superheroes played out in the story. In both *Fancy Nancy* (2005) and *Ladybug Girl*, (2008) the students had an opportunity to compare the character to another character featured in the unit. Through illustrations, story webs and writing they expressed how the characters are alike and different. They also wrote about which characters and story they enjoyed the most.

Implications for My Future Teaching

Creating Meaningful Dramatic Play Experiences

For the future, I plan on looking for more characters that engage in dress-up play. I plan on creating a dramatic play center within my classroom. I would also place the picture books from this study and others into the dramatic play center. I would like to see the students use these texts during their play, such as reading to dolls or reading to each other. This is just another way to invite opportunities for the

students to bring literacy into their daily practice. I would like to try to have more opportunities for the students to play dress-up more throughout their school week.

Sharing the Findings with Colleagues

Since completing this study I have taken my findings to my colleagues on my grade level team. I have encouraged them to try adding dramatic play into their literacy lessons. I have given my grade level team suggestions on starting a dress-up prop box and giving them the titles of the text that I used in this study. I am also interested in facilitating a small professional development session which will be presented to encourage the primary teachers to incorporate this useful teaching tool in their classroom practice. I plan on explaining the benefits of inviting dramatic play into the classroom. The professional development will be focused on my findings from the students in my class. I will have representations of my students writing pieces from the study. I will present to them that using dramatic play within your classroom should be a part of developmentally appropriate practice. Using other research around the topic I will provide readings for the teachers to read to further engage them into this idea.

The idea of using play in the classroom is an idea that I believe strongly in. Performing this research study has given me another approach to teaching literacy. I plan on using the findings from this successful study to further guide developmentally appropriate instruction throughout a balanced literacy program. The students made strong connections from their play and incorporated that knowledge into their reading

and writing activities. I plan on taking this information and developing other meaningful hands on experiences that can stimulate active learning through not just literacy but, across the curricular learning environment.

Recommendations for Future Research

Impact of Play on Students' Development

I believe that any kind of play is important for young children to encounter. Students can develop meaningful social relationships, and make connections through life experiences and class work while playing. Further research around play in the classroom could continue to show the positive effects that play has on early childhood learner.

Connections between Visual Arts and Literacy

Students are natural drawers and writers. When they are invited to create illustrations or models of their understanding it can be a meaningful and developmentally appropriate way to engage the students. Students can take ownership of their work when it is created by them. They can explore different forms of visual arts and interweave it into forms of play such as readers' theater props. Further research into the ideas of using materials such as clay, sand, and paints could provide more proof that hands on learning makes successful students.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to explore the idea of dramatic play in an emergent literacy classroom. Can dramatic play enhance literacy development? The finding of this research has shown that imaginative play with the students invites them to use knowledge of their play experiences during reading and writing lessons. Students made connections between their play and the characters from the texts. The students also began playing out the story during their free play. As Dyson (1997) stated (as cited in Ahn and Filipenko 2007), “Play allows children to both explore emerging ideas and to create ‘possible roles in possible worlds’”(p.14). By using language during their play students can describe other worlds, events and characters. Young children’s worlds are filled with diverse stories and experiences that they can bring into their learning. The students work hard at their play. During this study I observed how they became problem solvers, played make-believe, and grew socially through their play and their literacy development. My reluctant readers and writers became excited about writing and reading with other peers. They wanted to write and draw about the characters and make up new stories of their own. Early childhood teachers must remember, play acts as a powerful learning tool that students can use to develop their physical, emotional and social skill and emergent learning abilities around. Children who are offered playtimes during their school day can expand their reading and other academic skills. By inviting the students to explore these characters and literacy activities, I created rich dramatic make-believe play experiences and literacy lessons that enabled students to bring their prior knowledge make connections to text and real world experiences to life.

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